

## Harry Crow

The Dursleys are excruciatingly normal. They were just plain ordinary people, trying to live their orderly lives. Why should they take what they consider an abnormal freak into their home? This is so not a crossover fic.

This story's first paragraph consists mainly of the wonderful words and work of Jo Rowling from the book that started it all. I claim only the mistakes as my own.

## Chapter 1

"Dumbledore you can't. I've been watching them all day. You couldn't find two people who are less like us. And they've got this son — I saw him kicking his mother all the way up the street, screaming for sweets. Harry Potter come and live here!"

"It's the best place for him," said Dumbledore firmly. "His aunt and uncle will be able to explain everything to him when he's older. I've written them a letter."

"A letter?" repeated Professor McGonagall faintly, sitting back down on the wall. "Really, Dumbledore, you think you can explain all this in a letter? These people will never understand him! He'll be famous — a legend — I wouldn't be surprised if today was known as Harry Potter Day in the future — there will be books written about Harry — every child in our world will know his name!"

"Exactly," said Dumbledore, looking very seriously over the top of his half-moon glasses. "It would be enough to turn any boy's head. Famous before he can walk and talk! Famous for something he won't even remember! Can't you see how much better off he'll be, growing up away from all that until he's ready to take it?"

Professor McGonagall opened her mouth, changed her mind, swallowed, and then said, "Yes — yes, you're right, of course."

After taking the child from Hagrid's massive arms, Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall bent forward over the bundle of blankets. Inside, just visible, was a baby boy, fast asleep. Under a tuft of jet-black hair over his forehead they could see a curiously shaped cut, like a bolt of lightning.

"Is that where — ?" whispered Professor McGonagall.

"Yes," said Dumbledore. "He'll have that scar forever."

"Couldn't you do something about it, Dumbledore?"

"Even if I could, I wouldn't. Scars can come in handy. I have one myself above my left knee that is a perfect map of the London Underground. "

And with that, a young child's fate was sealed - or was it?

-oOoOo-

Petunia enjoyed this time of day the most, early in the morning before her two strapping boys had risen from their beds. This was her chance to read the gossip columns in the daily paper while peacefully enjoying her first cup of tea. Only after this much loved ritual would she start making the large breakfast her men folk required. This was her normal way to start the day and Petunia hated anything that interfered with her oh so normal life.

Discovering a baby on your doorstep when you went to fetch the morning paper was certainly not something that could be considered normal. That the baby had his tiny fist clutching a letter addressed to Petunia Dursley immediately ruled out any chance of mistaken identity, the child had been deliberately left at number four Privet Drive's doorstep.

The chill that saw Petunia draw the quilted housecoat tighter around her thin body wasn't purely down to this year's first touch of frost on their front lawn. That a baby could survive out here, never mind be ignored by both the milkman and the paperboy, reeked of something she was desperately trying to forget even existed. The reports on the news of owls behaving strangely and weird light shows in the sky began to make some sense to the housewife, only something cataclysmic in the magical world would see this child end up here. Lily's eyes staring at her from this child left no room for doubt to his identity.

Petunia was reluctant to take the Potter child into her home but what choice did she have? if she left him there then the neighbours were bound to notice eventually, that couldn't be allowed to happen.

Vernon was awoken by his clearly upset wife, that he couldn't smell his bacon cooking provided a further clue to just how upset she was. Seeing the letter clutched in her hand had Vernon sitting up in bed and reaching for his reading glasses.

After reading the words on the strange paper, Vernon blew his top. "Who do these bastards think they are, that they can dump their unwanted rubbish on our doorstep and expect us to look after their mess? I'm sorry to hear about your sister Petunia but we will not be raising her son. We'll just give him back and explain we don't want the little freak."

It was a very nervous Petunia who answered her enraged husband. "The letter said that the boy living here would provide some kind of protection for our family, for Dudley, shouldn't we..."

Her husband cut right across her. "That's a load of tosh, designed to get us to take the boy in. If our family is in danger then we call the police, I would rather put my faith in them than some crackpot who leaves babies on doorsteps in November."

"But Vernon, where would we give him back to? An orphanage?"

"The boy will be better amongst his own kind, didn't you say once that they had their own government?"

"Yes, but I wouldn't have a clue where to find it. I visited a place called Diagon Alley once when Lily had just turned eleven, I never went back there again."

"That will have to do then. I'll go there and hand the sprog over to the first respectable person I see. Put this letter back in the envelope and they can have that as well. I'll want my breakfast first though."

Petunia recognised an order when she heard one and rushed downstairs to the kitchen. As she was cooking breakfast, it gave her time to reflect on the wider implications that the Potter child currently in her living room signified, Lily was dead. She attempted to

rationalise why that news didn't hurt her more and could really only come up with one answer.

As far as Petunia was concerned, the girl she knew as Lily Evans started the process of being dead to her from the first year the redhead left on that train to Scotland. Lily finally completed that journey the day she angrily proclaimed Vernon Dursley wasn't good enough for Petunia Evans. Petunia drew no comfort from the thought that Lily's own marriage had apparently been a direct contributor to her death at the age of only twenty one.

-oOoOo-

Vernon was in a foul mood. He'd walked up and down Charring Cross Road at least a dozen times and all he had to show for it was sore feet. That wasn't exactly true, his left arm was numb from the weight of the child he had resting there. Vernon had seen plenty of what he would consider 'freakish' people walking up and down too, but they all seemed to disappear the instant he took his eyes off them. He had resorted to staring but something always seemed to catch his attention just before they disappeared.

The child was starting to grin again but Vernon had the Dursley patented answer for that, his mother swore by it and it had worked on his own son. One of Dudley's old dummy tits dipped into a tiny pot of honey soon quietened the child, the boy liked it so much his little hand closed over Vernon's meaty finger.

For Vernon, this was like the curtains being drawn back. Suddenly he could see the decrepit old pub sitting there exactly as his wife described it. He had never seen an establishment that was less inviting in his life but it held the means for him to dispose of the bundle currently clinging to his finger, he kept his head down while entering the Leaky Cauldron.

Petunia had told him he needed to go through to the back of the pub where a wall would grant him access, though he would need to wait on someone opening it before he could enter the alley. Their fears of Vernon standing out as being normal were proving totally groundless, he could have rode in there upon an elephant and no one would have batted an eyelid. The whole place appeared to be in the midst of some kind of celebration, a celebration that seemed to have been ongoing for at least a day or two.

He had no trouble following a young family through the back of the pub to reach his destination, Vernon then found himself standing in what he considered to be the capital city of freakish. This brought even more problems though, he'd promised Petunia he would leave the child with someone respectable. Try as he might, Vernon just couldn't see anyone who matched his description of that word. He had just about settled on an ice cream shop when Vernon spotted the large, white marble building. Discovering that this was a bank cemented his decision, he boldly walked up the wide stairs to an establishment that screamed respectability at him.

The shock that awaited him inside the marble building almost had the disgusted Vernon running back out, a closer look saw him change his mind. Yes these creatures were undoubtedly not human, but this establishment was also undoubtedly recognisable as a bank. There were tellers working with orderly queues waiting to be served, that the people in these queues were clearly freaks was only to be expected. What clinched it for Vernon was that these creatures at least knew how to dress properly. All wore three piece pinstripe suits, with bow ties or cravats, none of these robe things that their customers seemed so fond of. He could ignore the large teeth and pointed ears, anyone wearing a suit couldn't be all bad.

Vernon himself was of course dressed in a suit so girded his loins and joined what he considered the shortest queue. When it was finally his turn to be dealt with, the surly little creature didn't even look up while displaying a shocking lack of customer relations skills.

"What do you want?"

Vernon thought this would be easy, he was accustomed to using his imposing size to bully those smaller than himself - which was just about everybody. Deciding to get straight to the point, he also let loose with his razor sharp wit. This was a double whammy that should ensure he obtained the outcome he wanted here. "I want to make a deposit!" With that, he dumped the boy and letter on the teller's counter. A smiling Vernon didn't notice the two goblin guards with razor sharp axes take up position behind him, only the teller's raised hand stopping them taking further action.

The names of Potter and Dumbledore on the letter meant this needed to be passed up to a higher authority, this was way beyond what any goblin at a teller counter was cleared for.

The little creature flipped up a 'position closed' sign before jumping down from his high stool and waddling away with the letter clutched in its long fingers, leaving Vernon with no other choice but to grab the child and follow on behind.

Barchoke was busying himself with tying down the Potter accounts and properties. Since wizards had decreed his clients wills would not be read, he intended to ensure that any who tried would be denied access to all Potter property. He was currently debating with himself what to do about the trust fund James and Lily had set up for their son when a knock at the door had him calling enter.

He was reading the note held in his hands while studying the sorry human sitting across from him, Barchoke was impressed by neither of them. This obese human walrus had dumped the last scion of the House of Potter onto his desk as if it was a pile of dirty laundry. The goblin parted the blanket Harry was wrapped in to study the child. Its little hand shot out and immediately wrapped around his finger while golden eyes stared into the green eyes Harry had clearly inherited from his mother. The goblin also couldn't miss the scar on the child's forehead.

"Can I ask why you brought this child here?"

Vernon appreciated the opulence of the office he'd been led into, this was no mere teller. He also decided to be perfectly honest with this creature. "I didn't know where else to take him. It was this or an orphanage, but I felt it would be better if he was raised amongst his own kind. I have no idea how to arrange that, which is why I brought him into your bank."

The goblin couldn't mistake the emphasis this human had placed on the phrase 'his own kind', Barchoke had been hearing this phrase from wizards his entire life. Teller Griphook also told him the large pile of garbage was as conceited and arrogant as any pureblood he'd ever met, that information had not been passed on in English.

Goblins had been putting up with that rhetoric for generations because nothing was more important to them than treasure, and the

so-called guardian of Harry Potter had just placed untold treasure on his desk. Barchoke needed more information though before making any decisions here. "The wizard who signed this letter is the most powerful figure in British magical society. If Gringotts were to attempt to place Harry Potter with a wizarding family, Dumbledore would remove him and once more take the child to your house."

Vernon appeared resigned now, though hardly upset about the matter. "Very well, I will just have to take him to an orphanage. I still think he should be raised by his own kind but I won't lose any sleep over the matter. I refuse to have my son exposed to his freakishness, staying at our house is simply not an option I'm prepared to accept."

The goblin knew what this statement meant for the 'protection' Dumbledore was attempting to establish at this residence, that the muggle knew nothing of the benefits of these wards was hardly Barchoke's fault. He really had only one more question to ask. "Does your wife agree with this decision?"

Vernon's answer left no room for any doubt. "Absolutely one hundred percent. Our main concern will always be our own son, and we won't let anything interfere with that."

Barchoke sat back with his long fingers steepled in front of him, he appeared the epitome of calm while his mind was racing a mile a minute. He well understood that the radical thoughts running through his head could see a blade part him from it but Barchoke was slowly talking himself into a crazy course of action. Even mentioning this action to the director would mean his life could never be the same again, he thought the possible benefits outweighed the very real risks. "Mr Dursley, there might be something I can do to help but I would need to speak with the director of the bank first. Can I offer you some refreshments while you wait?"

As the tea, milk and sugar appeared on a small table that moments ago wasn't there, Vernon was all set to politely refuse until a tray of fruit scones was suddenly next to it. This was a temptation too far for Vernon who quickly accepted his host's offer.

Barchoke was mentally rehearsing how he was going to pitch the biggest gamble Gringotts bank and his race had taken in centuries to the director, knowing Ragnok would already be in a bad mood

since he didn't currently have an appointment. At the moment Barchoke thought the odds were at best a coin toss. Tails he would win or his head he would lose.

-oOoOo-

The Potter accounts manager had sweat running off his forehead by the time he finished the pitch, Ragnok was too quiet. The expected explosion soon came though.

"You want to throw the goblin nation into a war over a human child? I think you've lost your head and I am ready to give the order that will make that condition permanent. What do you think the ministry would do when they discovered we have the child they're calling the-boy-who-lived and hailing as their saviour?"

"With the greatest of respect sir, I don't believe the ministry will be involved in this at all. Dumbledore blocked the Potter will reading and told the Wizengamot the boy was safe, he certainly won't want to publicly admit to everyone he lied. If it were to become known the Chief Warlock left the Potter heir on a muggle doorstep, it might even be a large enough scandal to bring him down."

Barchoke took the director's silence as permission for him to continue talking. "After the happenings over the course of the other night, there can be no doubt the boy really is a child of prophecy. Having Harry Potter raised by goblins would be a coup of epic proportions, and provide us with a golden opportunity to install goblin values in a wizard destined for greatness. We have Dumbledore over a barrel, provided the lad attends Hogwarts at age eleven. I would also like our healers to have a look at the dark magic lurking at the site of his scar."

He could see this appealed to the director but his next question showed there was still a ways to go to convince Ragnok this could be good for the goblin nation. "Even without the backing of the ministry, Dumbledore could still make a lot of trouble for us. How do you propose to handle the old wizard?"

This was the crux of the matter, the next few minutes would determine if he left this room with his head still attached to his shoulders. "That letter passes responsibility for Harry Potter onto his muggle relatives," Ragnok nodded impatiently so Barchoke blurted



out the next bit. "I plan to draw up an escrow agreement, that should take care of all the legal requirements."

Barchoke sweated as the silence drew out, it was broken by the deep belly-laughter rolling out of Ragnok. "Oh that's too cruel, legally cut Dumbledore off at the knees. I approve!" Barchoke almost sunk to the floor in relief but his training saw him stand proud, the director's next comment really surprised him though. "Go and arrange for our young crow - no, let the lad henceforth be known as old crow..."

Ragnok was laughing now at his own wit, it would be a stupid goblin that didn't laugh along with the director. "Go and arrange for old crow to spend the next ten years learning the ways of our people, you understand that I hold you personally responsible for the success of this project?"

Barchoke quickly agreed and thanked the director for this opportunity, before getting out of there as quickly as he could. Ragnok personally naming the child would add a level of protection Barchoke couldn't have considered when thinking through this idea, as a wizard being raised as a goblin - Harry would need all the help he could get.

Barchoke himself had been touched by tragedy when his lifemate had died during a complicated and difficult childbirth, that the son she'd died giving birth to barely survived her by twenty-four hours was a double tragedy. That this son was their first child compounded the misery, like young Harry - Barchoke was now the last of his line. Oh there were a few distant cousins still lurking about who hoped to inherit everything once he passed from this world, only if he didn't challenge the greedy cowards to a duel before the end. At least if they defeated him, they could then claim it had been earned.

Young Harry Potter had touched something more than just his finger in that office. Here was another much loved son destined for the scrapheap of life because his mother had died prematurely, well not if Barchoke could do something about it. His clan had looked after the House Potter finances for generations, he was just taking those close ties a step further. If things went the way he hoped, Harry Potter would be adopted as his son until the child was old enough to make his own decisions.

-oOoOo-

Vernon was trying to decide if having a fifth scone could be considered as being greedy when his host re-entered his office. He actually appreciated this creatures no-nonsense approach to business, there was no time wasted on mindless chit-chat about sports or the weather.

"Mr Dursley, have you ever heard of an escrow agreement?" As expected, this question was met with a negative response so the goblin banker explained the concept. "As you already know, Gringotts is fundamentally a bank. An escrow agreement is where a sum of money or property is held by a third party until specific conditions laid out in a contract can be met. I propose an agreement between the Dursleys and the House of Potter, with the goblins acting as bankers - looking after the property until the predetermined conditions are met. As the Potter account manager, my signature should be acceptable on a business agreement until young Harry comes of age."

Vernon wasn't sure what was being offered here and wanted to make certain he understood everything before making any decisions. "Can the brat be considered property, and what would these conditions be?"

Barchoke was really having to keep his temper in check at this muggle's disrespect to a child. How anyone could treat a toddler with such hate was beyond goblin understanding. "In magical law, children and wives are routinely considered property of the wizard, that will cause no problems. As to the conditions, I think we should keep them as simple as possible - less chance of other people being able to attach their own interpretations to the wording then."

Vernon was naturally all in favour of keeping things as simple as possible, just as long as he left here without the bundle in his arms.

"I think it's safe to assume that it's not the child himself you and your wife object to, rather the fact that he's probably a wizard." Vernon agreed with that assessment so Barchoke gave him the gist of the Dursleys' part of the agreement. "If fate decrees the child is not a wizard, he returns to your family to be raised as your nephew. If, on the other hand, Harry Potter is a wizard, the escrow agreement

would see Gringotts responsible for him until the boy becomes of age to represent House Potter."

This sounded exactly what he wanted but Vernon was determined to double check everything. "So, unless he's normal, my family will never see him again?"

Barchoke gave him the confirmation he needed. "That describes exactly what the contract will state, though I must point out it is imperative that your wife also signs the escrow agreement."

Since both he and Petunia were certain the brat was a freak, this would work out perfectly for them. "That will not be a problem, how long will it take to draw up the papers?"

The words had no sooner left his mouth before the teller he had first dealt with entered the office with a scroll in his hands. Vernon left Gringotts thinking that normal banks placed far too much emphasis on being polite and caring to their customers, and not enough on taking care of business. As he retraced his steps through the pub he actually pitied the poor goblin bankers - imagine having to serve nothing but freaks all day.

-oOoOo-

The healers were extremely angry, Barchoke fully shared that anger after hearing their diagnoses and prognoses. They were raging that this child had been left untreated. Even worse, it would appear that treatment was deliberately withheld. The longer this condition went untreated, the more severe the trauma would be for removing this disgusting thing from the child. As the healers sent for a pig to act as a new host for this abomination, Barchoke knew it was his duty to report this news to the director. The Potter accounts manager could confidently predict there would be no laughter at this meeting.

That the dark one had stooped so low as to use this most foulest form of magic would not only disgust Ragnok, it was practically a foregone conclusion that all the vaults under Gringotts would need to be inspected in case any more of these affronts to nature existed there. It was also not inconceivable that a certain Albus Dumbledore could suddenly find himself suffering from 'banking difficulties'. What was inconceivable to the goblin was that the Chief Warlock could miss the dark magic radiating from the child's scar, to deliberately

ignore this was criminal. For a goblin, committing a crime against a child was as low as you could get.

-oOoOo-

Albus could no longer ignore the readings - or lack of - coming from the instruments he'd tied to the wards around the Potter boy's residence. He'd been putting this confrontation off but, with the children now safely on the Hogwarts express to begin their Christmas Holidays, the headmaster's last excuse about being too busy had left with them. It was time to once more visit Privet Drive.

It was an invisible Dumbledore who took his second stroll along Privet Drive, he wanted to ensure his instruments weren't malfunctioning before disturbing the Dursleys. His wand soon confirmed the information his sensors at Hogwarts were telling him, there were no wards whatsoever around this property. Albus decided to do some snooping.

Watching through the window as Petunia played on the floor with her large son, all the while the husband sat in an enormous chair and never removed his head from the newspaper, Albus was puzzled why Harry wasn't part of this scene. It would appear the only way he would discover the information he required was by entering the house. He at least had the good manners to ring the doorbell and wait until it was answered.

Petunia was stunned when she opened the door, she was just reminding herself that it was nearly Christmas - and not Halloween - when the six and a half foot gaudy garden gnome spoke.

"Good evening Mrs Dursley. My name is Albus Dumbledore, could I have a few words with you regarding your nephew, Harry Potter?"

The instant she heard the name Dumbledore, Petunia tried to slam the door in his face. Unfortunately, for whatever reason, the door refused to move from the open position. "Harry Potter doesn't live here, and we don't know where he is."

This led to a rather loud 'WHAT!' from the wizard. Vernon had started moving the second he heard the name Dumbledore mentioned, he was now thundering down the hall to confront this wizard who caused him so much work.

"My wife is correct, the freak doesn't live here. Did you honestly think you could just dump the brat on us, without as much as an explanation, and we would accept that? You must be used to dealing with the wrong kind of people, decent, hard-working folk like us would never accept that situation."

Albus was seriously struggling to accept the situation he was finding himself in. "...but, I left you a letter."

Vernon always had a quick and fiery temper but this idiot just poured petrol all over it. "Do you honestly think that including a letter makes amends for dumping a baby on someone's doorstep? You sir need to go and get yourself a job somewhere as Father Christmas, the kids might accept the crap you hand out but the Dursleys never will."

Albus had his half-moon glasses in one hand, while the fingers of his other massaged the bridge of his nose. "Where is the boy, what have you done with him?"

Vernon was quite proud of himself for the solution he'd devised, he didn't see the need to tell this freak though. "I negotiated a contract, Petunia signed it and then it turned golden before disappearing. I was told this would only happen if it was legal and above board, we'll thankfully never have to see the brat again."

As the muggle was reliving that particular morning in his mind, Albus was watching it unfold using a mind probe. he couldn't help but be shocked at what he saw. "The goblins have control of Harry Potter, do you realise what you've done?"

Vernon wasn't about to stand here and have his elegant solution questioned. "Hey, you were the one who left him on a doorstep in the middle of the night. I at least put some effort into making sure he was raised by his own kind."

Albus was now glad he had charmed the area around the door, the arguments were getting louder and there appeared to be no possibility of him being invited inside. "How could you possibly think the goblins were 'his own kind'? Didn't you read the part of the letter that told you Harry living here would offer this family protection?"

Vernon got even louder, screw the neighbours. "Tall or short, you're all just freaks to me! ...and no, we didn't buy that protection shit you were trying to shovel."

This infuriating muggle had just given Albus a massive headache, how to get Harry Potter back. He decided to leave them with something painful to mull over. "A young couple with a son, same age as yours, were recently tortured into insanity. They may be technically still alive but that young mother will never hold her child in her arms again. The protection gained by Harry living here would have prevented that ever happening to you." He heard the gasp of terror coming from Petunia and thought the bitch deserved it. How could anyone give away their only nephew?

"I shall leave now and wish you a Merry Christmas, we can only hope you and your family enjoy many more."

Dumbledore popped away, leaving Petunia clinging to her husband's arm. "Oh Vernon, perhaps we should have kept the freak? We could have stuck him in the cupboard under the stairs out of the way..."

"Petunia, the old man was deliberately trying to scare us. He's just pissed off because he didn't get his own way."

This was little comfort to the worried mother. "But Dudley..."

"Listen, let's enjoy Christmas and, if you still feel the same way in the New Year, we'll look at moving house. It wouldn't hurt for me to get a shotgun either, soon show these freaks we mean business."

Vernon could see the worry literally drop off his wife, Petunia was probably planning how she would decorate their new home. The new house should also have a bigger lounge, this would be the excuse for him to buy that new giant TV he had his eye on.

-oOoOo-

Albus walked up to the first available teller at Gringots and asked to see the Potter accounts manager. The goblin in front of him though just added to his already bad day.

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No I thought..."

"What do you want to see him for?"

"That's personal, needless to say..."

Albus was interrupted again. "Who shall I say wishes to see him?"

"I am Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, surely you must have heard..."

"Wulfric after Percival but before Brian?"

Albus could only sigh and nod his head in agreement, only to discover the goblin wasn't even looking at him so he was forced to say 'yes'.

"Okay, and last name Dumbledore? I'll go and see if there is anyone available to deal with your request at the moment. Please remain here."

It had been Dumbledore's experience that when the goblins were at their most obstructive, it meant you had upset them in some way. He was struggling to think what he'd done to merit this treatment but reckoned he would soon find out, he didn't have long to wait. Four security guards with drawn weapons surrounded him and demanded he follow their lead.

He was surprised but delighted to find himself in the directors office, now at least he was getting somewhere. Or so he thought. "Director Ragnok, delighted to see you again..."

The director cut across him as abruptly as the teller had. "Let's cut the dragonshit Dumbledore, I have better things to do than stand here and listen to you talk nonsense. The reason you are in here is to give you this." Albus found a scroll being slapped into his hand. "This is a notice of vault closure, you have twenty-four hours to take your belongings from the Dumbledore vault before we seal it. After that time, Gringotts will no longer do business with you."

This was totally unexpected and an extremely serious development, getting kicked out of Gringotts was a sanction used for only the very worst offenders. "Perhaps there has been a mistake here?"

"Oh yes, and it was you who made it. We now know that the dark one is not gone, and we also know how this was achieved. This was information that could have seriously compromised Gringotts, yet you deliberately withheld it from us."

Albus suddenly understood what was going on here. "Did you find any in the vaults? You must tell me!"

Ragnok's answer was scathing. "Oh, so now you want a spirit of cooperation between us? I must tell you nothing. Get him out of here."

Albus was being dragged out before he'd got what he came for. "Wait, What about Harry Potter?"

The director's sneer was predatory. "Send his Hogwarts letter to Gringotts, I'll make sure he gets it."

Albus was rather unceremoniously herded into the main lobby of Gringotts by the guards, the old wizard then headed back to Hogwarts. He would need to make some quick arrangements on where to store the items from his vault. Albus decided to tell no one about this, being barred from Gringotts was ammunition his enemies didn't need to have.

His plan for Harry Potter was to ensure the boy wouldn't be seen again in the British magical community until the child's arrival at Hogwarts. That plan was still viable, though it would be a different Harry Potter who now stepped onto the express. Just how different was something Albus was going to have to wait ten years to discover.

A/N thanks for reading

A/N 2 - When I came up with the escrow idea, I just couldn't resist a nod to my favourite author. How Harry Crow came to be will be explained in the next chapter, where our hero makes his way to Hogwarts.



A/N 3 Since the Queen was nice enough to give me an extra day's holiday to celebrate her diamond jubilee, I decided to use the time to post the first chapter of my new story.

## Chapter 2

Hermione Granger was different, she'd always known that. It would be hard not to when the children that you attended school with went out of their way to point this fact out to you every single day. Having really bushy hair and rather large front teeth were obvious targets for her main antagonists, being top of every class didn't help the situation any either. Her continual lack of friendship had led Hermione to seek her escape in the printed word, always having a book in her hand though was just more ammunition for the various groups of Hermione haters. She may have heard variations of the terms buck-toothed bushy-haired bookworm hundreds of times, that didn't mean those words didn't hurt on each and every one of those occasions.

Then, almost a year ago, an event happened that explained why she was different - Hermione Granger was a witch! While her mum and dad had taken some convincing of this fact, the instant Professor McGonagall had spoken those special words Hermione had known deep within herself this was indeed true. The preceeding months had been some of the best of her young life. Schoolyard taunts no longer had the power to hurt, she was different and would be leaving for a special school where things would be so, so different.

Hermione Granger was done with being an outsider, she was going to a place where everyone would be the same as her - a place where she could finally have friends. This had been her shield and armour against the taunts and jibes that had viciously escalated as the bullies attempted to get a reaction from their favourite target. It was perhaps somewhat understandable then that the young witch was near to tears since those dreams were beginning to appear to be mere fantasy, and she wasn't even on the bloody train yet.

The day had started so well too, up at the crack of dawn so she could be fully prepared for her new adventure. A breakfast where she never seemed to stop talking was followed by the car ride to Kings Cross - bright and early of course. Saying goodbye to her parents at the barrier had been hard, but a new life awaited her and she was quite prepared to run through a brick wall to get there. Hermione did just that, and then things started going downhill.

On her first sight of platform nine and three quarters, it wasn't the bright red Hogwarts Express that caught the young witch's attention.

It was the group of four witches already in their green-trimmed Hogwarts robes that drew Hermione like a moth to a flame. Unfortunately, just like said moth, she got burned. Deciding to introduce herself, Hermione was met with looks of disgust and derision - it wasn't supposed to be this way. Confidence severely dented, she then discovered another problem.

Her trunk, loaded of course with extra books, that her dad had easily lifted onto the trolley was proving impossible for Hermione to physically place on the train. As she struggled with the trunk, sniggering laughter almost had her in tears.

A kind voice cut through her frustration and mounting despair. "Can I help you Miss?"

Hermione raised her head and had trouble believing the person standing there could possibly exist, far less be speaking to her. If Fitzwilliam Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet ever had a son, he was standing right in front of Hermione Granger and offering his assistance. The boy was even dressed as if he'd just stepped out of the pages of *Pride and Prejudice*, Hermione's favourite book.

His black frock coat had silk lapels, it also had to be wide at the shoulders to accommodate the body it clothed. Being fitted to accentuate a slim waist was also an effect that the young witch appreciated. The grey waistcoat just visible under the coat matched his trousers, with button up black boots being a nice touch. The ascot knotted cravat, with a diamond cravat pin being a fitting finish to this very nice ensemble. His jet- black wavy hair hung down to his shoulders and framed what Hermione would consider a kind face, but those wonderfully expressive almond shaped green eyes melted her heart. If it wouldn't be considered blasphemy, Hermione reckoned this boy was too gorgeous even for Jane Austen to do justice.

She must have muttered some kind of answer to his question because he smiled and lifted her trunk clean into the compartment. With that smile, Hermione knew she was gone. Her mother had sat Hermione down for a talk about boys before she headed off to Hogwarts, the young witch had foolishly thought most of it would never apply to her. Hermione had never understood her classmates' devotion to the latest boy bands, who cared what 'new kids on the block' were doing offstage, or on stage for that matter! She had

though her first crush would be on some handsome author or, heaven forbid, a teacher. In the space of a few seconds the boy in front of her had just shattered that illusion into a gazillion pieces.

She had to say something, he couldn't leave here thinking she was some drivelling drooling moronic fan girl, she didn't even know his name. "Thank you, that was very kind. You're welcome to share this compartment, if you want?"

The words were out before Hermione realised what she'd said, she was berating herself for once more providing an opportunity to be hurt when his wide smile surprised the hell out of her.

"I'd like that, very much."

Not believing her luck, she offered her hand for shaking. "I'm Hermione Granger..."

The boy didn't shake her hand. He took it by her fingertips and very gently turned her hand around before bending down and lightly brushing his lips over the back of her knuckles. There was no longer room for any doubt, Hermione Granger was well and truly smitten.

"Very pleased to meet your acquaintance Miss Granger, my name is Harry Crow."

Hermione just started to babble as the words poured from her mouth. "Nobody in my family's magic at all, it was ever such a surprise when I got my letter, but I was ever so pleased, of course, I mean, it's the very best school of witchcraft there is, I've heard — I've learned all our course books by heart, of course, I just hope it will be enough..."

The laughter coming from Harry certainly couldn't be classed as sarcastic, it seemed almost friendly in nature. "Relax Hermione, and breathe occasionally. We've a long train journey ahead of us, plenty of time to get to know each other and become friends."

Hermione couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Friends?"

"Oh, sorry if I'm being a bit presumptuous here, my main reason for attending Hogwarts is to hopefully make friends."

"Me too, and I would love to be your friend."

Both then sat and began their journey, not only to Hogwarts but the much more important destination of friendship.

-oOoOo-

Albus paced up and down his office, as jumpy as the proverbial cat on a hot tin roof. Harry Potter had been missing from the wizarding world for almost a decade, today would see his return. The goblins had kept a very close eye on the boy but this evening he would come back into Albus Dumbledore's domain, it only remained to see how much damage he would have to undo from the boy's unorthodox upbringing.

Albus intended to permanently wrench the boy away from the goblins, and had a scheme in place to achieve this at the first available opportunity. Tonight the boy would learn who the real power in magical Britain was, and it wasn't any goblin.

-oOoOo-

As the express sped them away from London, Harry was trying to make sure his new friend wasn't pulling his leg. "So your parents are a type of healer, but they only heal inside their patient's mouth?"

Hermione could hardly contain her laughter at Harry's disbelieving look. "Yes, that's what dentists do. I'll make a deal with you, you can ask me anything about muggles if I can do the same with you regarding purebloods?"

"I'm sorry but I can't do that, I'm not a pureblood Hermione."

"Oh, I just took it from the way you're dressed that's what purebloods wore."

Harry was looking wary at his new friend, he still wasn't sure whether this was some kind of wind-up. "I'm supposed to be dressed as a muggle, are you telling me this isn't right?"

This time Hermione couldn't hold her laughter, that was until she saw Harry's crestfallen appearance. "I'm sorry Harry, I thought you were making a joke there. Muggles used to wear clothes like that,

but not for the best part of a century." She was desperate for more information but didn't want to push anything, Harry seemed really upset at her revelation.

"This is great, instead of blending in with one group of students I'm going to stand out like a sore thumb. The tailors made exact copies of the styles in the muggle studies books, how could they be wrong?"

Hermione had an idea what had gone wrong but needed to make sure. "Did they get those books from Diagon Alley?" Harry's nod was all the confirmation she needed. "My mother thought that would at least be one subject she could understand so bought a few of the books, mum said they were some of the funniest things she'd ever read. All of the information in them is about a century out of date, and even then some of it was wrong. She reckoned that the authors had never actually met someone without magic."

"Well, that's just great. Director Ragnok named me Old Crow, he would probably have been better calling me Bertie Bott!" He saw the questioning look on Hermione's face before remembering she knew a lot less about the magical community than he did, it was time to tell her the story.

"Bertie Bott's is a type of sweet that comes in every flavour, that describes me perfectly. My mum was like you, muggleborn while my dad was a pureblood. Both gave their lives to save mine when I was just a toddler. I can't remember anything about them and now my adoptive father is a goblin. As I said, the goblin leader named me Old Crow, due to the way I ended up in Gringotts. My father calls me Harry Crow but my mum and dad named their new born baby Harry James Potter..." He couldn't miss the gasp that came from Hermione at that revelation.

"So, as you can imagine, I have a foot in many camps but don't know which one I belong to... I had hoped to honour my mother's memory by dressing like this today but it looks like that's gone now."

Hermione couldn't help herself, without even thinking about her actions, she had moved across the carriage to sit beside Harry and already had him in a hug. "Oh Harry, you know I'll help you any way I can."

He was as stiff as a board, goblins didn't do hugs. As Hermione offered her assurance of assistance, Harry began to relax and think that the goblins had got at least one thing wrong - this was nice. For some reason he trusted this girl, his first real friend, and began to tell her more than he'd intended to reveal.

"When my parents were murdered, I was dumped on the doorstep of my mother's muggle sister. They didn't want me so did a deal with Gringotts where the goblins will look after me until I'm old enough to take up the responsibilities of heading House Potter. I have this weird mixed heritage and soon I'll be forced to make a decision, just where does my future lie."

Hermione was holding him close and thinking this was something she could get used to. She needed to help her first friend. "I read accounts of Harry Potter in a few reference books, all of them speculated on what had happened to you after that Halloween. Looks like none of them were even close."

This drew a slight laugh from Harry, and allowed Hermione to release her hug before it became embarrassing. She still continued to sit closely beside him though.

"You should have seen some of the Harry Potter books they tried to publish as true stories of my life, they would certainly have entertained your mum as much as those history books. My father soon put a stop to it, making it illegal for anyone to make a profit off my name."

Hermione was puzzled about a million different things concerning Harry but didn't want to push, she hoped he would tell her in his own time. One thing in particular bothered her though, and she thought it wouldn't cause any major secrets to be revealed, so asked Harry about it. "I started getting the wizarding newspaper, to try and prepare myself for Hogwarts, and they have been promoting the boy-who-lives going to Hogwarts angle for months. The drawings they published of Harry Potter look nothing like you though, you've no scar or glasses."

"Apparently I had a scar when I first went to Gringotts but the healers dealt with it. As for the glasses, I can only assume they thought because my dad wore them that I would need them too. The books featured the same type of drawings, and also had my father

asking where they got their information. None of them would say anything."

Just then, they endured the first of many visits from people wanting to know if they'd seen Harry Potter. Boy-who-lived fever was breaking out all over the express, with search parties hunting along the train for a sight of their elusive prey. Hermione noticed Harry's personality would change anytime someone else entered the compartment, quickly reverting back as soon as they were alone again. She didn't want to ask him about it and ended up biting her bottom lip so as not to blurt something out. Harry must have seen the question in her expression though and answered her.

"The goblins claim to have three faces, the one the public sees, and then there is their true self. Their true self is reserved for family and friends."

Harry smiled at her to ensure she knew he now counted her in this group. "The final face is the last thing their enemies see just before they die. They may be bankers now but goblins are really warriors at heart."

Hermione's curiosity got the better of her and another question slipped out before she could catch it. "What was it like growing up with the goblins?"

Harry was enjoying talking about his life with someone else, this was not something usually available to him. "I actually grew up as a goblin, though clearly I knew I was different. That goblins and wizards barely tolerate each other didn't help me any, I got into a lot of fights when I was younger." Hermione had her arms around him again, encouraging Harry to speak of things he never had before.

"Some of the adults weren't too pleased about the situation either, my dad is a powerful goblin who legally adopted me as his son. There were a couple of goblins who strongly objected, my father fought two duels to the death over me."

Harry was drawing comfort from being held in his friend's arms, he found that once he began talking about this that he couldn't stop. He'd never had anyone to talk to about his life before. "Had my father been defeated, I really don't know what would have happened to me. I needed to learn to stand on my own two feet as quickly as



possible, and my father provided me with all the training I could handle. Being different actually worked in my favour for once. By the time I was six, I towered over all of the children in my classes. Now I'm taller than my father, though he can still kick my arse when we duel."

"He sounds like a wonderful man - sorry, goblin."

That slip had Harry smiling again, allowing Hermione to reluctantly end their latest hug. "I just call him father, and I'm sorry for unloading all this onto you. We've only just met today yet I feel I can trust you, please don't ask me to explain why."

Hermione understood the amount of trust Harry was placing in her, and decided to reciprocate with some revelations of her own. "I understand about being different Harry, I've been bullied since my first day of school because I was seen as different. I thought it was because I was a witch, only to discover today that I'm still different. Those witches that I spoke to wanted nothing to do with me, I'll be twelve in a few weeks and you are the first person whose ever wanted to be friends with me."

Harry now had first hand experience of how a hug could make you feel better, he decided his friend needed one so that's what he did.

Hermione couldn't believe it, in the space of a few hundred miles she'd travelled from despair to being hugged by the most famous boy in her new world. That this went via crushing on a stranger to now having a best friend made the entire trip really magical. She was also struggling to comprehend just what he'd had to endure. Her dad had called down to her primary school a few times when the bullying got really bad but Harry's father had risked his life twice to protect his adopted son. Hermione didn't ever want to think about anything happening to her parents, yet Harry had already lost both of his and knew his adoptive father was fighting duels to the death to keep him safe.

There and then Hermione decided that her new mission in life was to be the best friend she could to Harry, the first boy ever to hug her. They chatted for hours, growing closer and closer the further from home they got. As they finally approached their destination, the pair took turns at waiting outside the carriage while the other changed into their Hogwarts robes.

Harry had one last word of warning for his new friend. "Hermione, I'm half expecting trouble when I get to Hogwarts. perhaps it would be better if..."

Hermione put an end to that avenue of thought in an instant. "No Harry, whatever you were going to say there is no chance I'm going back to the way I was before getting on this train. You're my friend and that's more important than any school."

The wide smile he gave her after this declaration did funny things to her stomach, Harry offering his arm saw her sporting a matching wide smile of her own.

"Shall we Miss Granger?"

It was time for the public face. "Delighted Mr Crow."

-oOoOo-

Hogsmead station hardly deserved the name, it had a platform to allow people access to and from the train and that was it. It also appeared to be in the middle of nowhere, with the few lit lamps fighting a losing battle against the rapidly encroaching darkness as evening fell. It was to be expected that the temperature in the Scottish Highlands would be considerably lower than that of London, a fact that saw most of the older students pull their robes tighter around them and head directly to the waiting carriages.

Harry and Hermione were halted from following their example by the appearance of a hairy man-mountain holding a lantern aloft. "Firs' years! Firs' years over here!"

The towering figure was soon surrounded by all the first years. He appeared to be looking for someone in particular, it was also obvious from his expression that he didn't find who he was looking for. "C'mon, follow me — any more firs' years? Mind yer step, now! Firs' years follow me!"

They stumbled and slipped down a steep dark path that had Hermione mumbling a question to Harry, "Have they never heard of Health and Safety?"

They soon found the ground levelling off as they approached the shore of a dark body of water, it was the magnificent castle that seemed to grow out the mountain on the other side that demanded all their attention though. The castle was huge and had many turrets and towers, all sparkling with lights shining from the countless windows. Hogwarts was something straight out of the pages of a fairy tale.

It was only the large man shouting that drew their attention to the fleet of little boats sitting on the shore, Hermione thought they were coracles.

"No more'n four to a boat!"

Harry helped Hermione into the boat before also offering his assistance to the twin sisters who had approached with the hope of sharing.

The large man obviously had an entire boat to himself. He quickly checked that everyone was sitting in a boat before an order of 'forward' saw the little craft slip fully onto the water and begin to make their way toward the castle.

Parvati introduced both herself and her twin sister Padma Patil before proceeding to talk their ears off all the way across the lake. She appeared to have the annoying habit of asking a question and then providing her own answer. Her sister just sat quietly, probably immune to her twin's rantings by now. "What house do you think you'll be in? I don't really mind since we're the first of our family to attend a British magical school. Have you any idea how we get sorted? I heard it was some sort of test, though one boy was claiming we had to wrestle a troll..."

Harry could see Hermione starting to slip into panic mode at this onslaught of questions, probably because she didn't have any answers. He literally couldn't move any closer so placed a comforting hand on her knee. "My father told me an ancient magical artefact will decide which house we belong in. No tests, and certainly no trolls."

Parvati now appeared much more interested in Harry's hand resting on Hermione's knee. This resulted in a barrage of personal

questions, questions that neither of the two had any intention of answering.

Only the boats entering a dark tunnel appeared to halt the verbal onslaught and soon they were disembarking onto a shingle beach. Harry was again a gentleman and helped all three girls out the boat. A long flight of stone steps ended at a massive oak door, anything less than oak would surely have disintegrated when the enormous man pounded on it with his fist.

The door was then opened by a black-haired witch in dark green robes, her entire demeanour screamed 'don't mess with me.'

"The firs' years, Professor McGonagall, and he ain' amongst 'em!"

The big man appeared ready to burst into tears before the stern professor pulled him aside. Everyone could still hear their conversation though.

"Pull yourself together Hagrid, did you count them?"

The man they now knew was named Hagrid seemed affronted by this. "O' course I did, all present an' accounted fer professor." It was only then that what McGonagall was implying hit Hagrid, they were all here so the person he was looking for must be amongst them.

"We'll just let the sorting ceremony answer that question."

Hagrid went away happy while McGonagall began giving them a brief introduction to the Hogwarts Houses, and what they stood for. Harry and Hermione hardly heard a word, it was clear to both of them just who the staff were looking for.

As McGonagall left them for a moment to check how things were progressing, Harry took the opportunity to whisper to Hermione. "Just remember, I can look after myself..."

He didn't get to say anymore as the blond boy, who'd been one of the students looking for Harry Potter on the train, decided to hold court. "Harry Potter doesn't come to Hogwarts and they're all wetting themselves, pathetic. Do you know why he's not at Hogwarts? It's because he's dead! Do you really think a toddler could defeat the dark lord?"

Hermione saw this boy's words were making an impression and was desperate to intervene, especially as one or two of the girls appeared close to tears. This was not her secret to reveal though so once more she bit her bottom lip, Hermione reckoned this was something she was going to have to get used to.

"You're nothing but a liar Malfoy..."

"Well, where is he Bones? Your aunt is the head of the aurors, has she ever seen him? No one has seen hide or hair of Harry Potter since that night. My father often has the minister of magic over for dinner, and even the head of our ministry has never seen Harry Potter. If it wasn't for that oaf Hagrid spouting stories in the pub every time he gets drunk, no one would know anything about that night."

One of the redheads, who'd also been looking for Harry on the train, reacted rabidly to Malfoy's claims. "Dumbledore has seen the boy-who-lived, he's kept him safe from evil creeps like your father."

Malfoy was more than a match for this verbal attack, he immediately taunted right back. "Perhaps the great Dumbledore dropped him off at your hovel weasel, what's one more kid amongst your tribe. Does your mother even remember all your names? Harry Potter isn't here because he's dead, and dead people don't come to Hogwarts."

This was met by screams, not against Malfoy but for the irrefutable proof he was wrong. A bunch of ghosts had just passed through the wall, and a few prospective first years. By the time the group had recovered from this shock, Professor McGonagall had returned to lead them into the great hall.

Harry was now in full public face mode so Hermione tried to match his confident poise, the trouble was she felt anything but confident. Another downside to this was that both now stood out amongst their oh-ing and ah-ing peers. When the tattered old hat began its song, Hermione was left to wonder just how strange this new world was.

A girl called Hannah Abbot was called forward first and sorted into Hufflepuff, it was soon clear the process was being carried out alphabetically by surname. When Vincent Crabbe headed off to join the green-trimmed robes of Hermione's earlier tormentors, both

expected Harry to be next. When Tracey Davis name was called, they knew something was up.

Harry continually whispered reassurances that he could handle this but still had to practically push Hermione in the direction of the hat after her name was called. It didn't take long for the hat to place her in Ravenclaw. It was only after she was joined there by Padma Patil that the fun really started.

McGonagall called for Harry Potter, and no one moved. You could feel the mood in the hall drop as none of the remaining students stepped forward. McGonagall, knowing that the number of students she started the sorting with corresponded to the total names on her list, called his name again - with the exact same lack of results.

Hermione was gripping the wooden table hard enough to leave marks when Padma whispered a question to her. "Why wasn't Harry's name called?"

She really could reply honestly. "I don't know Padma, he should have been sorted before both of us. I just hope he gets into Ravenclaw, sorry you got separated from your sister."

"I'm not!" was the last thing said before the Deputy Headmistress continued with the sorting.

They were now down to just two boys left standing awaiting their turn under the hat. When McGonagall called on Blaise Zabini, there was finally only one. As Blaise headed off to Slytherin, all eyes were now focused on Harry.

"What is your name son?"

"Harry Crow professor."

McGonagall checked her list again to confirm what she already knew, there was only one name there she hadn't yet ticked. "I don't seem to have you down here Harry."

"My father confirmed I would be attending, and the circumstances surrounding my attendance..."

This was Dumbledore's moment, he would force the boy to choose in front of the entire hall. Once that initial choice had been made, there would be no going back to this goblin nonsense.

Dumbledore stood and waited until he had everyone's attention before speaking. "Perhaps I can shed some light on the matter Professor McGonagall. I did indeed receive Mr Crow's letter, and read the special circumstances he's alluding to. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to comply with those circumstances. This is Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, we have no accord or charter to accept a goblin into our school."

The headmaster was noted for his quiriness, one might even go as far as to suggest he was a touch mad. His comments had certainly shed no light on this matter as the boy left standing there was clearly not a goblin. Dumbledore wasn't finished though.

"If young Harry here wants to attend Hogwarts, it will need to be under the name his birth parents gave him. Harry James Potter."

A/N thanks for reading

A/N 2 Harry Crow was not meant to be my next story. HC wasn't even in my mind until Inannacat sent me a pm listing a story I might like. Defending Sirius Black has Vernon being proactive and Harry Crow was born before I had finished reading the first chapter. I never read any of the rest - not wanting to use any more ideas from Luiz4200 - though I do intend to go back and read it after completing this. When something inspires you, I believe it's important to say so and give credit where it's due.

## Chapter 3

"If young Harry here wants to attend Hogwarts, it will need to be under the name his birth parents gave him. Harry James Potter."

The silence that followed that announcement lasted mere seconds as everyone then attempted to shout at once. Dumbledore stood there with a satisfied smirk on his face and watched as the hall descend into chaos for a few moments. The boy simply wouldn't be able to refuse in front of all these witches and wizards, and then Harry would be back under his control. Albus would have until the summer holidays to find a suitable family to place the boy with, so there was no rush for that.

McGonagall finally restored order to the hall before rounding on Harry. "Is this true, are you Harry Potter?"

Harry and his father had prepared for his identity becoming publicly known, it was time to put those preparations to good use. "The headmaster is well aware that my adoptive father for the last ten years has been Barchoke, Senior Accounts Manager at Gringotts, and yes I was once called Harry Potter."

The mayhem this time kicked off instantly and took longer to get back under control. Harry Potter had been raised by a goblin? A goblin he even called father! It was a shocked McGonagall who once more turned to Harry. "How is this possible? I was there the night we left you with your muggle relatives..."

Hermione was of course watching her friend intently and thought she might just have caught a glimpse of Harry's third face. At McGonagall's revelation, he stood that bit straighter and stared directly into her eyes. Dangerous was the only word Hermione had to describe this version of Harry.

"And by what right did you participate in that atrocious event, Deputy Headmistress?"

The professor actually needed to take a step back at the venom radiating from those green eyes, before gathering her wits once more. "I was a friend of your mother and father's..."



The rest of the school couldn't believe it when a student, who hadn't even been sorted yet, cut right across the Hebridean dragon that was Minerva McGonagall. "I think 'was' is the operative word there. Don't expect any warm greetings should you ever meet them again. You did a great disservice to House Potter that night - as well as ignoring multiple laws set-up to protect children. Are you sure you should be working in a school, professor?" The sarcasm Harry loaded the word professor with couldn't be missed by even the thickest of Hogwarts students.

In the silence that followed McGonagall's slap-down, Padma grabbed Hermione's arm to get her attention. "You knew?"

She could only nod by way of a reply, Harry had turned his attention back to Dumbledore and Hermione didn't want to miss anything.

"I thank you for providing me with this choice headmaster, it's rather an easy one to make. You see I was very happy at my goblin school and never wanted to attend Hogwarts in the first place, it was my father who urged me to come here. I shall now be able to return home and tell him I tried my best but was neither welcome nor wanted."

The Hermione Granger who'd left Crawley that morning would probably have placed being expelled from school marginally below being killed in her list of catastrophic things that could happen to her. This Hermione Granger though had travelled to a different country and a whole other world had opened up for her. This Hermione Granger now had a best friend and was not about to lose him. Ignoring Harry's repeated claims that he could handle himself, she shot out her seat and rushed to his side.

"Hermione?"

"If you're leaving, then I'm going too."

Draco Malfoy was seething with anger. He'd made a big play to establish who was the king pin amongst the first years and now looked like a complete fool. Harry Potter had kept his silence, standing there and deliberately letting him dig a deeper hole for himself. Draco had never been so humiliated in his life. His father's instructions were to befriend the boy and then attempt to convert

him to their way of thinking, you didn't need to be a genius to see that would never work now.

His anger led to him loudly opening his mouth when he probably shouldn't have, his voice clearly discernible over the hubbub Harry's proposed leaving was causing. "Goblins and another mudblood? Just when we thought the once proud Potter name couldn't sink any lower!"

Harry left Hermione standing there beside a still shocked McGonagall and purposefully walked toward Malfoy.

The blond Slytherin was supremely confident. He was amongst his own house with his godfather sitting at the staff table. He was also certain he could take whatever verbal mutterings Potter came up with and turn them back against him. Draco nonchalantly stood to meet the advancing Potter but was totally unprepared for what happened next.

Harry walked right up to Malfoy and his hand was a blur as it powerfully backhanded him across the mouth, throwing Draco back onto the Slytherin table.

"You are a disgusting example of what inbreeding can cause, I challenge you to an honour duel."

Albus had been shocked at the boy's refusal to attend Hogwarts, nearly as much as his verbal assault on Minerva. He'd let this situation develop to see if it could be turned to his advantage, the headmaster seized the opportunity that presented itself here.

"Just how do you intend to fight a duel Harry, when you consider yourself a goblin and Mr Malfoy is clearly a wizard? You are aware the law prohibits goblins from using wands?"

"Had I been allowed to attend Hogwarts, you would have found I'm well versed in both wizard and goblin law. Perhaps if you had studied our laws more you would not have been barred from doing business with Gringotts for the last decade. Then again, you don't appear to pay too much attention to wizarding law either, they just allow you to get away with it."

You could be forgiven for thinking that the occupants of the great hall were all shocked out, given what had happened before. This revelation though drew loud gasps of astonishment, almost exclusively amongst those old enough to understand what being barred from Gringotts entailed. They had no way of knowing that the night was still young and there was a lot more to come.

"I am quite prepared to duel Mr Malfoy here while he uses his wand, I have my own weapon."

Harry withdrew a custom-made blade from his sleeve. It had a beautifully carved Hungarian Horntail fang as its handle with a razor sharp stiletto style goblin-forged blade protruding at least six inches from the grip. Even in the great hall's candlelit atmosphere, the blade seemed to capture whatever light was available and reflect back just how deadly a weapon this was. The knife's overall appearance greatly resembled that of a stylised wand.

"I'm afraid I can't let you do that Harry..."

Harry now verbally cut across Dumbledore too. "You actually left me no other option, the entire school faculty sat there and let this moron get away with publicly insulting me and my family."

Severus Snape was acutely aware of his godson's abilities, or lack of. Draco being defeated in a duel his first evening in Hogwarts would destroy the boy's credibility. He was forced to take action. "Mr Malfoy, ten points from Slytherin."

Draco would have loved to rant against the injustice of that punishment, the silk hankie now held against his mouth in an attempt to halt the flow of blood prevented him from doing so.

Harry gave a slight bow to the professor. "My honour is satisfied, though my curiosity is not. Was the ten points a punishment for the slight on my birth parents, my goblin father or Miss Granger's circumstances of birth?" Harry didn't expect an answer and wasn't disappointed.

"As I suspected, a combined total for all three. C'mon Hermione, time to get out of here. That piece of filth publicly calls you the foulest name imaginable and gets docked three points for it, and that only after I threaten to cut him to pieces."

He offered Hermione his arm as the pair headed for the door.

Filius Flitwick suddenly found a lot of things becoming clearer for him. He'd felt slightly ostracised by the goblin community for years now and couldn't figure out what he'd done to deserve it. These occurrences were beginning to make sense since discovering Dumbledore was barred from Gringotts. Albus was his boss, therefore he was tainted with the headmaster's crime by simple association. It was time to make inroads into repairing his goblin relationships, starting with calling this young boy by his proper name. "Harry Crow, Son of Barchoke, can I enquire how you intend to travel home?"

Harry turned and this time his bow was much deeper, it also was done with genuine respect. "Well met Master Flitwick, our director actually named me Old Crow but you weren't to know that. My father calls me Harry Crow so I won't forget my other roots. My father is a wise goblin who also provided me with a portkey home, I will activate it as soon as we clear the Hogwarts wards. I promise on my honour to see Miss Granger safely home."

"Well met Old Crow, Child of James and Lily, Son of Barchoke, Prophesied One."

Hermione had her hand on Harry's arm and felt him stiffen at that, he didn't give any other sign though. They both turned to see it was the sorting hat that had spoken those words, but the old hat was just getting started.

"Your father is indeed a wise goblin Harry Crow, he knows you must come to Hogwarts to fulfil your destiny. Hogwarts is prepared to welcome you, and grant all that welcome entails."

Dumbledore was not happy with that decision. "I am the Hogwarts Headmaster..."

"...Only as long as the castle allows!" The hat's declaration was followed by a loud clang of a bell being struck, a bell that hadn't been heard inside the castle in living memory. Hogwarts had clearly spoken. "Headmasters come and go but Hogwarts prevails. This school was devised and built by the four founders to teach magic to all those able to perform it, not so some supposed elite fraternity

could lord it over everyone else. Hogwarts needs to unite in the face of the coming darkness less all will be lost. Come and sit Harry Crow, let me sort you."

Harry knew his father thought his future was tied to Hogwarts, the hat's actions had just confirmed that. He looked to Hermione for her opinion. "What do you think?"

"Well, we're already here, and you'll still be able to take us home if we change our minds? I'll go and keep you a seat at the Ravenclaw table." Her gaze for that last comment was aimed at the old hat, clearly indicating that any other result was unacceptable.

Harry smiled at her before sitting on the stool and placing the hat on his head.

Dumbledore was livid, he was left standing there looking like the court jester while the main action happens elsewhere. The sorting hat was correct though, one could only be headmaster if the castle allowed. Without Hogwarts cooperation, he wouldn't even be able to access his office. Albus would just have to console himself with the fact that Harry would be here, available to be influenced by his headmaster.

The sorting hat was busily scanning the young boy whose head it was now sitting on. "Oh I am glad to see you easily qualify for membership to Rowena's House. I feel you'll need the friendship of Miss Granger and leadership of Master Flitwick during your stay with us. Therefore it has to be RAVENCLAW!"

Hermione was on her feet, leading the cheering from a surprised Ravenclaw house, they all had thought the-boy-who-lived couldn't go anywhere but Gryffindor. The applause from the house of the lions was at best muted. This boy had just stridden over to the Slytherin table and decked a snake; he then even forced Snape to take points from his own house. How the hell could he be sorted anywhere else but Gryffindor? A pair of red headed twins summed up the feelings of the entire house by continually asking the question, "We didn't get Potter?"

As Harry stood to cheering from his new house mates, he felt a thud on top of his head just before he removed the hat. Reaching into the tattered ancient relic, he removed a bejewelled but definitely deadly

goblin-forged sword. The blade was engraved with the name of Godric Gryffindor.

The hat had more to say. "Your heritage allows you to draw that sword, and your training prepared you to wield it. That sword acknowledges you as Hogwarts champion." A scabbard appeared on the stool that Harry soon had expertly fastened around him, the shoulder sash proclaimed 'Ravenclaw' across his chest. He then sheathed his new blade before handed the sorting hat back to an astonished McGonagall.

"Mr Crow, I shall expect you in my office directly after the feast."

"I will have to disappoint you headmaster, the law won't allow that. Since you are barred from Gringotts, you can't be alone with any goblin minor. My father must be present in any discussions we have." Harry respectfully bowed once more to Flitwick before handing over a scroll to his new head of house. "Here is a copy of the instructions the headmaster intended to ignore. Can I ask who Professor Snape is?"

All eyes then turned toward the greasy-haired teacher he'd previously dealt with, Harry again gave the short version of his bow. "No offence to your person or your professionalism sir but you fall under the same laws of distrust as the headmaster. Since it was only his word that prevented you being sent to Azkaban as a death eater, and the goblins certainly have no faith in Dumbledore's word, I shall not be attending any of your classes. I, and any of my friends I ask to join me, will be receiving private potions tuition."

Filius intended to study the scroll at his leisure but simply had to speak to the boy, if only to end the unbelievably strained silence his last remark had caused in the hall. No one was quite sure how to react to how things were developing here. The tension in the air was so thick, you could cut the atmosphere with a knife. "You seem well acquainted with a blade Mr Crow, can I assume you've had the proper training?"

Harry's eyes twinkled as he answered his head of house. "Master Sharpshard asked me to pass on his regards, he spoke highly of you sir."

The diminutive professor thought there must be something wrong with his hearing. "You trained under Master Sharpshard?"

Harry nodded, "I was honoured to have him as one of my mentors."

Harry strolled over to where Hermione was keeping him a seat, leaving a now totally bewildered staff table behind. Dumbledore was so shocked at the previous revelations, he forgot all about his pre-feast announcements and just waved his hand for the food to appear. Secrets that he'd kept hidden for years had just been broadcast to the entire school.

Minerva eventually sat beside the headmaster and her expression was thunderous. "I'm calling a full staff meeting for tonight, and you better have some answers for me Albus. I don't like being made a fool of in front of the entire school, especially by a first year. That acceptance letter should have come to me and I'll be wanting to know why it didn't. It must also have conveniently slipped your mind that Harry was no longer at Privet Drive when I frequently asked after his welfare over the last decade."

Any appetite Albus had left disappeared with that. After the evening he'd just had, the last thing he needed was Minerva on the warpath. When he looked down the other side of the table, Severus appeared ready to render young Harry down into potion ingredients. This was not how he foresaw tonight's sorting proceeding.

Filius had also noted his fellow head of house's vicious demeanour, and where his poisoned glare was directed. He decided some intervention was in order. "That was a smart move tonight Severus, young Malfoy's mouth invited trouble he was ill equipped to handle. Knowing at least one of Mr Crow's trainers, I can safely say he would have made mincemeat of Mr Malfoy."

Severus' answer was dripping with barely contained anger. "I intend to confiscate those weapons of Potter's as soon as this feast is over. First years with knives and swords, this place is certainly going downhill."

Filius couldn't let that pass. "I'm afraid you can't do that Severus. Hogwarts has accepted Mr Crow as a goblin student, with all the circumstances that acceptance entails. Mr Crow is not allowed a wand, but does have permission to carry a blade. Asking a goblin to

surrender his blade is an even worse faux pas than demanding a wizard hand over his wand."

"The boy is an arrogant little toerag, just like his father. Not even sorted and already making demands, he should have been allowed to leave the castle."

"I think you'll find that was the lad's intention, until Hogwarts herself intervened. I didn't know you'd met Barchoke but I would recommend not insulting him, or his son." Filius held up his hand to forestall Severus' objections that he knew would be coming. "Obviously Mr Crow is not a goblin, he is instead a wizard who has chosen to live his life by their customs and laws. What is the one thing all young witches and wizards are taught about goblins? Never mess with them."

"Potter is a first year student at Hogwarts - nothing more."

"Calling him Potter in that derogatory manner could see you kicked out of Gringotts, or challenged to a duel by the lad's father. I would remind you that goblins fight duels to the death. Should you or your snakes deliberately provoke the lad, he will react as a goblin would. His honour will dictate his actions, we've already caught a glimpse of those actions tonight. Have you ever heard of someone being chosen as Hogwarts' champion before? Harry Crow is no ordinary first year, and you would be foolish to think otherwise."

Harry sat down beside Hermione and noticed the entire Ravenclaw table staring at him. "Eh hi, I'm Harry..."

This proved too much for Hermione, she'd been wound tighter than any watch since stepping off the train. Her accumulated tension found its release as she burst out laughing. "If ever there was an unnecessary introduction, that was it."

With the food now appearing on the table, the ice was well and truly broken. Padma congratulating him for getting into Ravenclaw saw the floodgates open as questions poured in Harry's direction. He began eating and politely ignored most of the personal questions, though did admit he had no idea what a Hogwarts champion actually did.



A pretty Chinese girl was already making cow eyes at Harry, which was in turn making Hermione's blood boil. "Oh Harry, can I see your sword?"

Harry slowly finished what he was chewing before looking directly into the girl's eyes to give his answer. "Why miss, that's a rather personal question, and we haven't even been introduced!" He then turned to his friend with a question. "Hermione, what is that?"

The entire table was now laughing at a floundering Cho Chang, while a beaming Hermione was explaining to Harry what pasta was.

An older boy introduced himself as Roger Davies before trying to give Harry a heads-up. "You have no idea how popular you're going to be with the rest of the first years. The very thought of potions lessons without Snape will soon have them clamouring to be your 'friend'. I just wish you were in third year to get me out the man's class. He's usually vile to anyone who's not a Slytherin, and that was before you announced to the entire hall he was a death eater."

Harry glanced questioningly toward Hermione, private tuition with Harry was always going to get a yes from her. He then turned his gaze to Padma, the girl was blushing furiously but quickly accepted. "Some of the older students were telling us stories about his classes on the train. Losing points for breathing too loudly?"

Harry again thought a young lady was pulling his leg until older members of his new house started recalling experiences that were even worse than that one. This was a situation they had not foreseen and he would need to speak with his father before inviting anyone else to private potions lessons. As the stories of Snape's abuses got worse, the other six first year claws were now casting longing glances in Harry's direction. He was sure though that Dumbledore would have his father coming to Hogwarts before the week was out, Harry could ask him then.

Dumbledore was left having to make his planned announcements after the feast had finished. The Headmaster's 'avoid the third floor corridor unless you want to die a most painful death' did not sit well on top of all that rich food. Hermione was looking along the Ravenclaw table for some guidance on how to react to that instruction, the shrugs of shoulders she received as answers had

the young witch asking another question. "He does know this is a school, right?"

-oOoOo-

The prefects led them out of the hall towards Ravenclaw tower, their new home for the next seven years. Penelope was busy explaining about the bronze door knocker asking them to solve a riddle when the door unexpectedly opened. This particular puzzle was beyond the two Ravenclaw prefects until the knocker itself provided the answer.

"A Hogwarts champion can go anywhere inside the castle, all doors are open to him."

"Em, okay. So if you can't solve the riddle, you need to wait for someone who can - or just stick with Harry." Penelope may have intended that as a joke but Hermione had already made her mind up that's what she was going to do, and not just so she could avoid answering riddles.

They entered the Ravenclaw common room before being divided by gender as the prefects also split to show each of them where they would be staying. Harry was pleased to see a single room with a good sized four poster bed waiting on him. He removed his shrunken trunk from his pocket, placing it at the bottom of his bed before restoring it to normal size. There were places for their clothes and not much else though. The prefect explained this was to encourage the first years to study together, and there was a specific area of the common room set aside especially for them to do this.

Harry headed back down the stairs to the common room, and was not surprised to find Hermione waiting there. Harry felt he had to say something about earlier tonight. "Thanks for standing by me down there, that meant a lot. I found it hard to believe you were ready to walk out of here, after being so excited about coming to Hogwarts in the first place."

"Well, I was hoping to use the journey home to convince you about me attending goblin school."

This drew a slight laugh from Harry, "A portkey would have had us to London in under a minute, not that I would have needed a lot of

convincing mind you. Thanks also for not asking loads of questions, I can see how hard that is for you sometimes."

Hermione actually pouted at that. "You have no idea how hard I have to bite my lip, but I console myself by thinking that I already know more about you than anybody else. I hope one day we'll be close enough where you'll be able to tell me whatever's on your mind. The sorting hat calling you 'Prophesied One' seemed to shake you more than pulling that sword out the hat."

"There are some things I just can't talk about Hermione, and that is one of them. You are right though, you do know more about me than I had intended to reveal. One day, I might even be able to tell you everything."

"I'm already looking forward to it." It was time for bed now but neither was quite sure how friends said goodnight to each other. Hermione's insecurities began to resurface as she asked Harry one last question. "Will we go down to breakfast together?"

Harry's answer of 'every morning' had Hermione hugging him again. Saying goodnight like this just felt so right that both of them went to their new rooms very happy with this part of their Hogwarts experience.

-oOoOo-

Albus wasn't experiencing much happiness at the impromptu staff meeting, Minerva was demanding answers and he was loath to give any secrets away. After the boy's earlier revelations though, this had to be treated as a damage limitation exercise. He also decided to stick mostly to the truth, just not all of it.

"If you can remember back, we were all exceedingly busy after that Halloween. The very first day of the Christmas Holidays, I headed off to Privet Drive to check on young Harry's welfare. You can imagine my shock when I discovered Harry wasn't there." Albus saw no reason why he shouldn't embellish his tale to show a certain headmaster in the best possible light.

"Dursley had totally ignored my clearly written instructions; he just didn't believe there could be any danger to him or his family. Not only did he refuse to raise Harry, he somehow managed to find his

way to Gringotts. He deposited Harry there like some parcel; the Dursleys thought it was best that young Harry be raised by his own kind."

This caused eruptions amongst the staff, up in arms at that last comment. "You are not saying anything I didn't impress upon Dursley at my visit. His answer was that all magic users were the same to him. He and his wife apparently signed some magically binding banking agreement that tied young Harry to Gringotts until he reaches his majority. Tonight, I was hoping to see that agreement broken and have him attending Hogwarts as Harry Potter - we all saw how that went."

Filius was angry at the blatant bigotry being displayed here, that the charms master considered some of these people friends fuelled his temper. "That was a predictable, and also very foolish move Albus. You almost lost us the very thing you were supposedly trying to save."

All eyes had now moved to Filius, but it was Minerva who asked her friend to explain his comments.

"The boy has spent the last ten years living as a goblin, he's not about to renounce that upbringing at his first glimpse of an enchanted ceiling." Filius was encouraged to say more, his own heritage making him the acknowledged expert here.

"If I'm reading this correctly, his father has sent the lad here to be amongst magical children his own age. For what purpose? To help his son make the impossible decision he'll be faced with in a few years. Whether to live his life as a wizard or a goblin!"

Snape blew his top at that. "What a load of hippogriff shit! The boy is a wizard - end of story."

Filius though was equally as angry, and wasn't about to back down. "Just like you are a death eater - yet are here teaching children. Life is all about choices Severus - and you would be making a stupid one if you continue reaching for that wand."

Dumbledore reiterated his Head of Ravenclaw's warning. "There will be no wands drawn here. Please continue Filius, you are highlighting things I hadn't even considered."

"We have to look at this from a goblin perspective. Old Crow living the rest of his life as a goblin, or Lord Potter taking his place in magical society - which would benefit the goblin nation most? That Lord Potter would be an influential member of that society goes without saying. Having someone who was goblin raised in the very top echelons of magical society would be an unbelievable coup for Gringotts."

Minerva was struggling with what her friend was trying to explain here. "Are you saying his goblin father sent Harry here so he would eventually accept being a wizard?"

Filius was nodding, "I can see no other reason that makes sense, they must want Harry to gradually accept his place in the British magical community. Why else would they send him to Hogwarts when they have such a severe grievance with Albus? They are certainly well aware that other magical schools are available. Can you see Beauxbatons rejecting Harry Potter - whatever conditions were attached to his attendance?"

Filius never really expected an answer to his question. The entire room knew Harry Potter could turn up there calling himself Napoleon Bonaparte and still be welcomed with open arms.

"Goblins are barely tolerated by wizards inside Gringotts, those same wizards won't even give them the time of day outside their bank. In the muggle world, goblins stand out like clowns in a circus. Harry Potter singing the praises of goblins would go a long way to changing attitudes in our society, and perhaps even gain a toehold in the muggle one too. We all know about Lily Evans' heritage, and it would appear young Harry has already befriended a muggleborn witch."

This was the best news Albus had heard all night, he was back in the game. "Good, that will give me some bargaining tools when dealing with this goblin. I think we should meet Barchoke as soon as possible."

"Albus, you are already persona non grata with the goblins. Trying to make demands of Barchoke will get you nowhere, and could see you kicked out the castle. In any choice between you and Harry,

Hogwarts has already made her decision clear. He is her champion - a position last held by Godric Gryffindor I believe."

Minerva ignored Dumbledore's crestfallen expression and raised a real concern she had with teaching the lad. "How is he going to manage in my class without a wand? Mr Crow may be able to cope in subjects where one isn't needed but charms, transfiguration and defence all require one."

"I really don't know Minerva but I will say this, he wouldn't have been sent here if he couldn't do it. Many years ago, I was faced with a similar choice to Harry. Everyone here knows I'm of mixed heritage, I chose to be a wizard and was therefore allowed a wand. If they have somehow circumvented his need for a wand to perform magic, convincing Harry to make the same choice I did just got a lot more difficult."

Pomona Sprout had quickly recognised that Filius was indeed the expert here. The Head of Hufflepuff wanted to know just what effect having a 'goblin' attend classes would have, and if she would need to give any special instructions to her puffs.

"Just treat Harry the same as any other first year..." Filius ignored Snape's sneering 'finely some sense' and continued with his advice, "...please inform me if you come across any specific problems - I will approach him in regard to not having a wand tomorrow morning."

The meeting then broke up but the four heads of house remained behind, Minerva soon got the ball rolling. "I'm assuming you know what the sorting hat was talking about when it called the child Prophesied One? I'm also assuming you have no intention of sharing that with us?"

Albus replied in that infuriatingly calm way of his. "You are of course correct in both your assumptions Minerva, that is something that should never have been mentioned in such a public place."

She had expected no other answer. "What about 'handling the school's finances would be good experience for you Minerva - give you practice for when you're headmistress.' In light of the fact we now know you were barred from doing business with Gringotts at the time, would you agree you are a manipulative, lying bastard?"

Minerva never gave Albus time to conjure more lies, she just kept right on after him. "Every time you told me Harry Potter was fine was nothing but a bloody lie - you had no idea of the child's condition or welfare. He could have been locked in a cupboard for all you knew. What will you do when this story breaks, as you know it must?"

"My great age has at least taught me at least one thing. Problems are like bridges - best crossed when you come to them."

"...And the scar you wanted to leave young Harry with? It looks as if that was another of your decisions the goblins didn't agree with."

"It would appear so Minerva."

"Since you've spent the last ten years lying to me, you no longer have the right to use that name headmaster. Oh, and get that thing out the third floor corridor - otherwise I'll go over your head and see it's taken care of myself. It would be a shame to have a decade of experience running this place and not get the chance to be headmistress. It goes or you do!" Minerva marched out of Dumbledore's office, her threat hung there though - as real as any of the paintings in the room.

"Pomona, could you please tell Minerva that there is really no point in heading for Little Whining. The Dursleys had moved by the time I went back to have more discussions with them that summer."

Pomona left to check on her friend but Filius had a parting comment for the two who were going to remain. "Mr Crow is a Ravenclaw, and bound by law not to associate with both of you. If I should discover either of you attempting to break that law, I'm willing to see how much of Master Silvershard's teachings I remember."

Filius strode out of there, leaving two thoughtful figures behind.

It was Snape who finally broke the painful silence. "Do you think the brat knows about the prophecy?"

"The boy knows far too much for my liking!"

-oOoOo-

Hermione was up early and hurrying down to the common room, she didn't want there to be the slightest chance she would miss Harry for breakfast. Not only did she not miss Harry, Hermione ran right into him as he raced through the Ravenclaw entrance.

This collision had an unexpected effect on the young witch, it solidified Hermione's views on the three faces of her friend. His first was clearly Harry, the boy who had sat and chatted for hours with her on the train yesterday. His second face was the one he showed the public, Hermione considered this his Harry Crow personality - with a touch of Pride and Prejudice thrown in for good measure.

The young witch now had his third persona clearly etched in her mind, and what a picture it was. Gone was any pretence of the suave Mr Darcy, Hermione thought this Harry was more likely to be the son of Zeus and Hera. Here was a young Ares who was obviously in training, and he looked very good for it.

His hair was tied back in a short ponytail and Harry now wore his new sword strapped on his back. It was the roman like tunic, made of some animal hide, that really held her attention though. That it fitted him like a second skin really emphasised his physique, Hermione couldn't help but think Harry was amazingly developed for someone his age. His tunic was as black as his hair and glistened nearly as much as a clearly sweating Harry. She also just happened to notice that the tunic stopped well above his knees. He offered his apology for running into her before mumbling something about needing a shower. Saying he would be back down shortly, Harry then headed up the stairs at speed. Unable to take her eyes off him, Hermione watched Harry every step of the way.

Hermione giggled to herself, laughing at the thought of her mum and dad's reactions to the first letter she would be writing home. Her parents were in for quite a few shocks from their bookish daughter. Not only did she have a best friend at Hogwarts, Hermione needed her mum to send some exercise clothes as soon as possible! If morning exercises made Harry look that good, then Hermione Granger just had to give it a try.

A/N thanks for reading.



## Chapter 4

Hermione was sitting at breakfast, contemplating over her sausage, egg and bacon how anyone's life could change as much as hers had in the space of just a few days. Of course, to say the boy sitting next to her played a part in that would be a massive understatement. The more she got to know Harry, the more of an enigma he became.

Even his owl had to be different. Not only was it a beautiful snowy owl, Harry claimed Eargit was a free spirit that would never allow herself to be placed in a cage. She'd flown ahead to Hogwarts and just arrived on his shoulder whenever he wanted to send a letter to his father. The graceful bird of prey had also taken Hermione's first letter home to Crawley.

That this beautiful bird was named after a goblin Harry had read about in a history book was something she approved of. That was until she discovered the goblin's full name was Eargit the Ugly, and the goblin was male. Harry shrugged it off as goblin humour but Hermione felt an involuntary shudder travel down her spine, she suddenly had this image of Harry naming one of his children Albus Severus. That just wasn't funny no matter what culture you ran it through, both men gave Hermione the creeps.

For some reason, the headmaster seemed to embody everything her parents had continually warned their little girl about as she grew up. 'Don't talk to strangers' and 'Never accept sweets from strangers' had been recurring themes from her mum and dad. Perhaps it was because Hermione couldn't think of anyone she'd ever met being stranger than the headmaster. He tried hard to portray himself as a jovial grandfather figure but, every time he looked at Harry, his eyes betrayed him. This put Albus Dumbledore near the top of Hermione's shit list.

Top spot was already taken though, the school's resident potions professor was way out in front. When Dumbledore looked at Harry, it was more covetous. Like Harry had something the headmaster really wanted. With Snape, it was pure, unadulterated and undisguised hatred. She was very grateful that they wouldn't have to take any strolls down to his dungeon lair. Snape just screamed 'black and white horror movie creep' to the young witch. Give him a moustache he could twirl the ends of and he would be the perfect

archetypal villain. Suddenly she had this image of him as Dick Dastardly, with Malfoy starring as Muttley!

Harry drew Hermione out of her daydreaming by offering a knut for her thoughts. "Oh I was just wondering about today's lessons. We've got transfiguration this morning, you and Professor McGonagall didn't exactly hit it off at the sorting."

Harry laughed at her last comment, "Well, that's certainly one way of putting it. Our lessons so far have been a really mixed bag. Herbology was great and Professor Sprout really knows her stuff, History of Magic was a joke!"

"Harry, with your goblin sense of humour, that last remark could mean anything."

"We were learning about famous wizards and the impact they'd left on the world - how could anyone possibly make that sound boring? Even a goblin wouldn't think a class of children being taught by a ghost was something to laugh about. Speaking of laughable, that's really the only word I can think of to describe our defence professor. That loud redheaded Gryffindor broke wind as Quirrell walked past his desk, and our brave defence professor almost jumped six feet in the air with fright."

Hermione was trying not to laugh at that memory, the defence professor appeared as nervous as a stray kitten in a dog pound. She agreed with Harry and added her own critique of the Hogwarts curriculum. "Charms looks really interesting but I just wish we had gotten to try a few of them. Hopefully I'll get to use my wand in transfiguration."

They were interrupted by Eargit swooping down with a letter for Harry, and a parcel for Hermione. Harry's questioning raised eyebrow had Hermione blushing. "I asked my mum to send me some exercise clothes, I was hoping I could join you for a bit of training in the morning?"

This had Harry smiling. "Okay, but I think we should wait until Saturday morning before beginning. That will give you a couple of days to get used to the training without having to attend classes too."

He then opened his own note, nodding as the news was expected. "My father is coming to Hogwarts tomorrow, we have a meeting with Dumbledore. I wonder if Master Flitwick knows? Father can decide tomorrow if we want him in there with us. We better head off to class"

Harry was either stuck in some chivalrous period, or that goblin sense of humour was having a laugh at her expense. Either way, wherever they went, Harry offered his arm and she gratefully took it. She didn't know if this increased the whispering that followed Harry wherever he went, and didn't really care. Last night she was on his arm under the stars. It may have only been their astronomy lesson but that's not the way Hermione chose to remember it, it was easily the most romantic night of her young life.

They began walking toward the transfiguration class, with all the portraits making sure the Hogwarts champion knew exactly where he was going. Quite a number of the other first years had sussed this out so they tended to have an entourage between classes. Padma usually stuck quite close to them and all three were fine with that, it was the rest that were now becoming ridiculous. Not all of them were content to just follow on to class.

Parvati and that other Gryffindor girl were desperately trying to attach themselves like limpets to Harry. The Gryffindor boys though were becoming even more pushy, especially the redheaded one.

"Hey Harry mate, you must get fed-up hanging around with the bookworms. Anytime you want a break, the Gryffindor guys will make you more than welcome."

Harry just looked at him, "and you are?"

"Oh sorry, I'm Ron."

Harry's stare never wavered, "and who are you?"

He didn't appear to get what Harry was asking. "I'm Ron, this is Dean and Seamus and he's Neville..."

"Well, Mr Ron Ron, thanks for introducing you and your friends. Now, if you will excuse me."

Harry pushed past him toward the boy hanging at the back, since Hermione still had Harry's arm she followed on.

"Well met Neville Longbottom, I'm Harry Crow and, since you are practically family, please call me Harry. The young lady on my arm is Hermione Granger and this is our friend Padma Patil - her twin sister is in Gryffindor with you."

Neville stared unbelievably at Harry's offered hand before nervously shaking it. "Hi everybody, eh family?"

"Did you know my mum was your godmother?" This was clearly news to Neville, but not as shocking as the next bit. "Your mother is also my godmother." The boy appeared ready to cry at that but Harry now had his hand comfortingly on Neville's shoulder and Hermione had moved by his side.

"Voldemort cost both of us Neville, but I think you got the worst of the deal. There is no way you should now have to put up with a death eater teaching you. I would like to offer you the opportunity to join us for separate potion lessons."

"Are you sure?"

The pleading nature of Neville's demeanour at Harry's offer was heartbreaking to watch. He clearly had no self-esteem and couldn't work out why anyone would make such an offer to him. Harry responded the only way he knew how, honestly.

"I'm very sure Neville. Both the offers of private lessons and friendship are genuine, this is not some sick prank. Had things been different, we would have grown up together and I'm certain been best friends. We may have lost years but I would like us both to start down that road now."

The smile now on Neville's face was all the answer Harry needed and the four resumed their journey to transfiguration. Neville gave the impression of someone who'd just had the weight of the world lifted off his shoulders, he explained this as they walked.

"Snape terrifies me, and we've heard he saves his worst behaviour for Gryffindors. Ron's been trying to catch your eye all week, we're all desperate to get out of Snape's class."

"I've had the people in my own house dropping subtle hints all week too. The problem is that, when my father arranged this, it was supposed to be for me and hopefully a few friends. I can't really turn up with three quarters of first year without talking to my father again. He's coming to Hogwarts tomorrow so I might be able to help a few more out then, but I think I should offer places to my own house first. I would appreciate it if you could let slip to Ron Ron that I don't like pushy."

"Ah!" It was plain to see that the penny had dropped for Neville so he blushing offered an explanation. "Parvati was moaning about how you appeared friends with Padma but practically ignored her, she couldn't understand it..."

The musical laughter coming from Padma cut Neville off. "Oh pushy is a good description of Pav, there's a few other words I could use as well."

"So you're not identical then?"

"Physically yes, but we're definitely two different witches."

They chatted all the way to transfiguration before doing their usual and sitting at the front of the class. Harry's bag was charmed weightless and bottomless and he insisted that both girls put their book bags in there too. He handed Hermione hers and was about to do the same with Padma when the redhead Gryffindor stepped over the line. He'd just pushed Neville out the way so he could claim the seat on the other side of Harry.

"What are you playing at?"

Ron was unrepentant. "The boy-who-lived needs proper Gryffindor friends, not to be hanging about with Ravenclaw girls and Neville. The way you took down Malfoy was bloody brilliant! What quidditch team to you support?"

Harry's gaze would have had anyone else in the class moving seats, Ron was too stupid to know he was in any trouble. Harry had to

quickly decide the best way to play this. "I paid Malfoy the compliment of at least admitting he could be dangerous. You, on the other hand, are an idiot!"

Padma and Hermione were already on their feet, guiding Neville to their new seats. Harry then joined them, leaving behind a livid Ron who was now stuck sitting at the front of the class. The reason he was stuck there was that a certain cat had just watched the entire incident, transforming into Professor McGonagall before Ron could move or even reply to the insult.

Minerva decided that no action needed to be taken, she was actually delighted to see three Ravenclaws standing up for one of her cubs. That the youngest Weasley possessed the social skills of a troll was something that other members of staff had actually commented on.

McGonagall's transformation from her cat form led the professor neatly into her introductory remarks about how transfiguration was some of the hardest magic they would learn. Transfiguring her desk into a pig was always something that caught and held the new first years' attention. McGonagall was continuing her well honed introduction before noticing she didn't have the entire class' full attention, one of them actually appeared bored. This had never happened before so she cut short her talk to discover what the problem was.

"Is there something you don't understand Mr Crow?"

"Basically, all of it Professor."

McGonagall's lips tightened at this. "Could you please be a trifle more specific Mr Crow?"

Ron couldn't resist a jibe. "It's because he's an idiot!"

The sniggering this caused was all the invitation Harry needed to shut them up. "Well, I understood changing your desk into a pig was purely a demonstration, though not very practical one since you couldn't actually eat it!" McGonagall didn't seem too pleased with that analysis but could hardly refute the facts, she grudgingly nodded in acceptance so Harry continued. "It's all the different spell incantations and wand movements that confuse me. Since transfiguration is basically changing one thing into another, why do

you need a different spell for every occasion? Transfiguration is one of the easiest branches of magic to master, you're just asking your magic to perform the same function over and over again."

In all her years teaching, McGonagall had never come across this argument before. She could now see how someone who wasn't raised in their community could struggle with the concept. "What you have failed to grasp Mr Crow is the different types and complexities of transfiguration. We'll be starting off today attempting to turn matches into needles. Since they are approximately the same size, the spell has merely to tweak the shape and transfigure wood into metal. As we progress through the courses, we eventually move to configuring living material - which is much more complicated and taxing."

"That is where we are having the trouble professor, I've been taught the exact opposite. The only limitations governing the spell are the power and experience of the caster - and the mass of the initial object. Transforming your desk into a fly or an elephant is practically impossible because you are limited by the mass of material you start with. Whether that material is living or not is immaterial. I could probably transfigure my book into a pigeon but not a turkey - unless you know of a miniature variety?"

McGonagall was gobsmacked. If this boy was speaking the truth then everything she'd been taught - and in turn had taught others - was wrong. Minerva didn't know how she would deal with that. If this was a prank, Mr Crow was going to find himself in detention to at least third year. There was one easy way to find out.

Minerva had taught the marauders and now the Weasley twins, she had no intentions of being caught by any prank book. "Mr Crow, I'm going to give you one of my books. If you can transfigure it into a chicken, I will give you an 'O' - not for today but the entire year."

She placed a rather large tome in front of him and fixed her beady eyes on it. The boy removed his knife and began to wave it over the book. Minerva watched in astonishment as the leather binding started to grow feathers before a head and neck appeared as the chicken took shape. McGonagall was speechless as the chicken bobbed its head and strutted over the desk, it was left to Hermione to ask Harry the questions.

"You never said any incantations or performed a recognised wand movement, how is this possible?"

"Hermione, I speak English, Spanish, French and a smattering of Italian - do you think it makes a difference what you say, or what language you say it in, to your magic as it does what you want? Oh I of course speak goblin, though I refuse to use the derogatory terms wizards refer to that language as."

Hermione had never heard about this before so asked. "What do wizards call it?"

It was Neville who answered her. "Gobbledegook!"

Hermione's sense of injustice sprang to the fore. "What! That means talking gibberish - and is very insulting..."

McGonagall had found her voice again and didn't want the issue sidetracked. "Leaving goblin/wizard relations aside for the moment, I would like to hear a fuller answer to Miss Granger's initial question."

Harry waved his knife over the chicken and it slowly transformed into a basket.

"Chicken in a basket? I suppose this is more of the fabled goblin humour?"

Harry couldn't help but smile at Hermione's friendly jibe. He once more performed the goblin equivalent of the transformation spell and the basket became the cutest ginger kitten he could visualise. A tiny miaow and the kitten sauntered over to Hermione, it was soon on her knee and receiving the cuddles and petting it deserved.

Hermione thought this was her idea of heaven. A kitten she could play with that would eventually turn back into a book - it didn't get any better than that. "Harry, you have so got to teach me how to do that."

Harry now gave McGonagall, and the rest of the class the answer they were waiting for. "Once you master the basic transfiguration spell, it's then all about being able to visualise what you want the item to transform into and practice - lots and lots of practice. I can transfigure items up to about the size of a medium dog. The bigger



the item though, the slower my transfiguration will be. It will get quicker with practice and larger items will come as I get older."

Minerva had been a transfiguration prodigy and now held a mastery in the subject, an eleven year old goblin-trained wizard had just totally destroyed everything she held to be true. She was a powerful witch but couldn't even contemplate repeating the feat this boy just achieved when she was the same age. It wasn't just that though, Harry Crow just threw the transfiguration rulebook out the window. Where the hell did they go from here?

"Your method makes no concessions to the initial item or the finished product?"

"Oh some things are definitely harder to transfigure, usually because of the visualisation. A chicken is a lot more complicated an item than the book was, again it's down to practice and more practice. It's taken me a few years to get to this stage, and it will take a lot more to get where I want to go. I won't have to learn different spell incantations or wand movements for every change though."

Draco was livid that once more Crow was the centre of attention, he was a Slytherin though and had learned from his last experience. It was time to get someone else to fight the battle. "Professor, I thought the law prevented goblins possessing wands? Crow is surely breaking that law?"

Harry passed the knife over his original book a few times and it transformed into a pumpkin. This was certainly a miss-shaped pumpkin - it was a fair likeness for the head of Draco Malfoy. A couple of slashes with his knife and Harry had cut himself a slice of pumpkin, right down the centre of 'Draco's' face.

"Anytime Mr Malfoy wants a demonstration that this is a knife, I will be more than happy to oblige. It's obviously not made of wood and doesn't have a recognised wand core running through it - therefore, according to official ministry definition, it is not a wand. Before you quote the law, can I suggest that you at least look it up first."

Minerva thought that might be all the prescribed first year transfiguration book was good for now, as a demonstration tool. She placed the spell incantation on the blackboard, along with diagrams of the wand movements needed, before handing out the matches.

Minerva then sat at her desk to see how this played out. As she expected, Miss Granger and the Ravenclaw Patil sister both looked to Harry, wanting to try his method. Minerva couldn't miss that the other Ravenclaws and Mr Longbottom were also hanging on his every word, totally ignoring her instructions on the board.

That five of this group, not including Mr Crow, had successfully transformed their match before the lesson ended meant that she would have to take this to the headmaster. In her thirty five years teaching, her previous best result was three students performing the transformation before the end of their first period. Usually, Minerva was lucky to get one. That none of the students who had stuck to the method on the board got anything like a needle just compounded the issue. She dismissed the excited class without moving from her desk.

McGonagall had never lost control of a class before but who would want to continue with the prescribed instructions when the goblin method had just been proven to be clearly superior? She would have to approach Filius for access to Mr Crow, Minerva desperately wanted to learn this different method of performing her craft. Her ears picked up at an altercation happening outside her class and the professor was moving before she even realised it.

Ron was raging, he'd been called an idiot in front of the entire class. If that wasn't bad enough, all he'd managed to do was set his match on fire while Neville produced a needle. Watching the boy-who-lived working with Neville had his jealousy meter off the scale, especially after overhearing that Neville would be joining them for potions lessons tomorrow. He just had to say something.

"Think your pretty special now - showing the professors how to do magic!"

Hermione was on Harry's arm and tried to steer him away from another confrontation. "Ignore him Harry..."

"I wasn't talking to you bookworm. You knew who he was on the train but kept quiet about it, it's probably your fault he got stuck in Ravenclaw. The-boy-who-lived should be in Gryffindor - everybody knows that!"

Hermione couldn't believe the nerve of this clown. "You were right Harry, he's an idiot."

Ron wasn't about to take that from a girl, his wand was out and a curse fired before anyone realised what was going on.

Harry jerked Hermione out of the curse's path, but that just saw it hit Padma. Harry then flew at Ron, slamming him into the wall and snapping his wand before he could fire off another curse. Harry was just about to start pounding on him when McGonagall's voice boomed out along the corridor.

"Mr Crow, stop this at once. What do you think you are doing?"

"I think I'm stopping this idiot firing off any more curses in the corridor, please check on Padma professor. He cast a curse at Hermione but hit Padma instead." Harry didn't release his grip on Ron, waiting to hear what the spell was first before deciding if beating him up was worth the detentions that were sure to follow if he did.

Padma had trouble answering the enquiries after her health. Every time she opened her mouth, a large slug would slide over her lips and down her chin. She wasn't in any physical pain but being disgusted and mortified at the same time was certainly painful enough.

"Miss Granger, could you and her sister help the injured Miss Patil to the infirmary. Weasley and Crow, my classroom now. The rest of you, get to lunch."

Parviti and Hermione helped Padma off in the direction they'd been pointed while Harry practically threw Ron back into the classroom.

The Gryffindor decided that he who got in first would be believed and didn't even wait to be questioned. "Professor, he just attacked me for no reason, broke my wand too. I tried to stop him but the curse hit that other girl, that was an accident."

Harry sat calmly on the seat the professor had indicated, saying nothing before being asked a question. McGonagall duly obliged. "Well Mr Crow, can I hear your version of events?"

"Weasley here began shouting at us the instant we left the class," As this was what had alerted Minerva that something was going on, Harry was already being believed.

"He then made some ludicrous accusations against Miss Granger, who responded by pointing out he was an idiot. He took offence to the truth being spoken and fired a curse at her, I only just got Hermione out of its path. I then grabbed the idiot and pushed him against the wall, this must be what broke his wand. I was just about to punch him when you yelled for me to stop, so I reluctantly did."

"He's lying professor, I..."

Ron stopped in mid flow because Harry was now on his feet, it was his hand on the sword hilt that terrified him though. "Calling me a liar is not something I will ever accept. Do you want to change your mind or do we need to take this further?"

Ron then proved he wasn't a complete idiot by changing his story to the truth. "I'm sorry professor, it was all my fault. I lost my temper."

"You also just lost fifty points from Gryffindor and will begin two weeks of detentions tonight, now get out of my sight." Ron shot out of there as McGonagall now turned her attention to Harry.

"Mr Crow, while I applaud your actions in defending your friends, I can't condone your conduct in attacking another student. I would have been there within seconds and dealt with the problem."

Harry nodded in acknowledgement, "Your pardon professor, but my only other experience of Hogwarts discipline didn't fill me with confidence. You are correct though, and I will accept whatever punishment you wish."

Minerva almost smiled at that answer. "There will be no Ravenclaw points deducted and I was thinking along the lines of a single detention. I will speak to your head of house before confirming this, does that sound fair?"

"Certainly fairer than 'ten points from Slytherin' professor."

"Good, then let us both head for lunch."

Minerva found the boy to be polite, courteous and somewhat skilful at avoiding answering questions. What she did learn was certainly interesting, Harry had been working with tutors for years and his knife was one of a kind. That his knife had been commissioned and presented to him by the director of Gringotts clearly meant a great deal to the young lad. In terms of importance to him, Harry probably placed it above the sword that had never left his hip since the sorting.

Their cozy chat ended as they entered the great hall. Interrupted would probably have been a better description but both were too focused on the defence professor who just barged passed them to worry about semantics.

"TROLL! There's a troll lose in the dungeons, I just thought you should know..." Quirrell promptly fainted but Harry was already moving before the professor's body hit the ground.

-oOoOo-

He didn't care about the mayhem left behind him, there was somewhere he needed to be. Harry shouted at the first portrait. "I need the quickest way to the infirmary."

Sound travels faster than Harry could run so at every staircase or junction, there would be someone in the nearest portrait to guide the Hogwarts champion to his destination. Harry burst through the infirmary doors and it was testament to his frequent training that he still had the breath to speak clearly.

The three girls and the school nurse may have been surprised by his dramatic entrance, his revelations afterwards had them scared. "There's a troll lose in the castle, we needed to get to somewhere safe."

Poppy Pomfrey stared intently at the lad. "Young man, I remember your father when he attended Hogwarts. If this is a prank..."

"Goblins don't do pranks ma'am. There is currently a ten foot high ton of muscle, with spell resistant skin and a brain the size of a peanut, wandering about a school full of kids. We need to get behind a strong door that locks..."

At that, the doors of the infirmary crashed open once more, this time with considerably greater force than Harry had used. The troll actually took one of the doors right off its hinges as it entered the infirmary.

Poppy immediately placed herself between the children and the troll. She was a healer though, not a fighter, and her spells were doing nothing more than enraging the beast further.

"Ma'am stop, I'll try and lead it back out of here." Harry pushed past her and raced to the side of the beast. "Hey pea-brain - over here!"

The smelly troll wielded a club that was as thick around as Harry's waist, and that club was soon whistling in his direction. Harry had expected nothing else and had ducked under the club, his knife cutting a gash in the troll's thigh as he dodged past and behind it.

Harry now had the doors at his back and was trying to get the troll to chase him out them, the troll though had four easier targets already in the large room. As it once more made its way toward the girls, Harry slashed the back of its leg. "Hey smelly, don't turn your back on me. Didn't you know that was rude? Chase me, c'mon, try and catch me!"

The troll took a half-hearted swing at him before once more focusing on the girls. They were now huddled together against the back wall with the healer still standing in front of them, this was a much more attractive target than one who moved and fought back.

Harry had one last slash across the base of its back, targeting the gap between its loincloth and vest. The troll let out a roar of anger while preparing to vent its rage on the target in front of it. Harry wasn't about to let that happen, he returned his knife to its wrist sheath and drew Godric's sword.

The troll's next sound was a shriek of pain as it toppled to the floor, Harry's sword had sliced through the back of its right knee. It had still kept hold of its club though, and the troll was now within striking distance of its target. Lying on the ground, the enraged troll pulled its arm back to side swipe the now screaming girls.

The sword of Gryffindor in Harry's hands was so much faster, slicing clean through the troll's arm just below the wrist. It had never been

Harry's intention to kill the creature, just lead it from here so it could be captured. In this confined corner of the infirmary, and it now being so close to the girls, Harry really didn't have any other option. He jumped on the prostrate troll's back as his sword flashed down and bit deeply into its neck, severing one of the main arteries to its brain as well as its spine. It was a killing blow as the troll's life blood spilled out and covered the infirmary floor.

Harry now had time to look at the girls, what he saw there froze his insides. The healer was still in front of them, wand ready to defend as best she could. It was the girls though who Harry couldn't take his eyes off. They were all staring at him but it was the emotions displayed on their faces that told the story. Their fear was understandable but the revulsion and even loathing cut Harry as deeply as any blade.

Before they got a chance to say anything, Dumbledore, McGonagall and Sprout rushed through the destroyed doors. Harry was wiping his sword on the troll's waistcoat, more to give him something to do until his mind caught up with what had just happened.

While the two witches were looking around at the devastation wrought in Poppy's usually immaculate domain, Albus only had eyes for the boy. "What have you done Harry?"

Poppy jumped all over the headmaster. "This young man just saved four lives. How the hell did this thing get into the school - and what kept you?"

Harry turned and gave a deep bow to the healer. "Thank you Ma'am. May I say your actions here were exemplary, and I would also like to hear an answer to those questions."

Pomona was puzzled so asked what may be considered a stupid question. "Mr Crow, why did you immediately rush here? The troll was supposedly in the dungeons."

"No offence professor, but I wouldn't believe Professor Quirrell if he told me today was Thursday - not without checking first anyway. I wanted to make sure my friends were safe."

Albus was not for being distracted. "Was it necessary to kill the poor creature?"

"I was trying to lead it back out the doors but it had locked on a target and wasn't for being shifted from that course. Hogwarts, your champion needs assistance."

All eyes now watched Harry, wondering just what he was up to. They didn't have long to wait as the Bloody Baron came up through the floor.

"How can Hogwarts assist its champion?"

"I need to know how this troll got into the school."

"Quirrell had observed how the headmaster got the other troll into the school and simply copied the procedure."

Harry was glaring at Dumbledore while asking the next question. "Where is Quirrell now?"

The Bloody Baron was now joined by the Fat Friar who answered that question. "Quirrell is attempting to break into the third floor corridor that is currently out of bounds."

"It would seem I owe Quirrell an apology." Harry's glare never left Dumbledore. "Letting a troll into the castle, then sending the staff in the opposite direction is rather clever. Why did he need a diversion headmaster? Is this something the staff will deal with or must I head up there too?"

McGonagall grabbed Dumbledore and practically threw him out the infirmary. "This is something the staff will deal with Mr Crow." Sprout quickly followed them out.

In the moment of silence that followed their departure, Harry too started to leave the wrecked infirmary. "Mr Crow, where are you going?"

Harry didn't turn around, nor stop. "I am sorely in need of a shower Ma'am." He then walked out the infirmary, leaving more than a dead troll behind.

A/N Thanks for reading



## Chapter 5

Cleaning his knife and sword again wasn't strictly necessary, but the repetitive and familiar actions required for this task offered Harry some comfort. At this moment in time, that was as good a reason as any for Harry to be sitting doing nothing but that. After his shower, he didn't really feel like facing anyone else at the moment. He was currently holed up in his room but was surprised when his self-enforced solitude was broken by the Ravenclaw house ghost.

The Grey Lady passed through his closed door to speak with the young Ravenclaw. "The Quirrell problem has been dealt with by the senior staff..."

"Yeah? Just a pity they weren't in time to deal with the troll problem in the infirmary."

"You did very well today young champion, your father will be proud of you."

This was scant comfort to the hurting young lad. "He might be the only one, the headmaster certainly wasn't too happy with me."

"You should come down to dinner, see your friends..."

Harry gave that idea a resounding no. "I think I'll just stay in my room. My father is coming to Hogwarts tomorrow, I can't wait to see him."

Seeing the boy was struggling with the consequences of his actions today, his house ghost made a suggestion. "Hogwarts can ensure you're not disturbed, if you wish?"

He had a faint smile on his face at that suggestion. "Yes, I would like that."

As the ghost left, a tray of food appeared on the bed beside him. Hogwarts would look after her champion.

-oOoOo-

The senior staff were all in Dumbledore's office, there was a half-empty bottle of firewhisky on the headmaster's desk. The bottle

would take even more of a hammering before their meeting was finished.

Minerva repeated the question that had three heads of house hitting the fiery liquid. "How can Voldemort not be dead? Even the death of poor Quirinus didn't finish him off, we all saw that spirit escape."

Pomona though was looking at the incident from an entirely different angle. "I find it very hard to believe that Albus just happened to mention he was going to be removing the item from the third floor this weekend, and we were all fighting a possessed professor the very next day. Was that why the stone was brought here in the first place, as a trap for the dark lord?"

Filius didn't like the further implications behind Pomona's conjecture. "I have trouble believing it could be mere coincidence that this all happened the year Mr Crow came to Hogwarts?" You could practically see the wheels turning inside the little professor's head as he replayed the other disturbing information that had recently been revealed. The conclusions he was coming to were scaring the Head of Ravenclaw, he rounded on Dumbledore. "You knew Voldemort wasn't gone and decided not to tell anyone, didn't you? I'm willing to bet the goblins discovered this, and that's why you were barred from Gringotts."

These assumptions also led Pomona to draw her own terrible conclusions. "Child of Prophecy, Hogwarts Champion and now slayer of trolls. I'm also willing to bet the prophecy concerns that child and Voldemort, and Albus Dumbledore knows all about it!"

Minerva had no problem following her two friends' train of thought. She also didn't like where that train was heading, nor was the Head of Gryffindor shy about taking her complaints to the conductor. "If I discover you were in any way responsible for that troll incident today, I will take my findings straight to the board of governors. Children's lives were put at severe risk with that creature loose in the castle!"

Filius had more to say. "In light of our suspicions, I demand to be at that meeting with Barchoke tomorrow. I am Mr Crow's head of house and intend to see his best interests protected while Harry's at Hogwarts."

This was one bandwagon Minerva definitely wanted to join. "I demand to be there too. If Voldemort returns and young Harry is involved, it will undoubtedly affect the entire school. You have lost the trust of your heads of house, we no longer believe that you can be relied upon to fulfill your obligations as a headmaster should."

Pomona was in wholehearted agreement with those sentiments. "This doesn't just affect a specific house, those pupils in the infirmary could have been from any of the four. Poppy is a renowned healer but would be the first to admit she was out of her depth today. Young Mr Crow literally saved their lives, and all you could do was attempt to reprimand the lad."

The head of Hufflepuff's disgust at Dumbledore was there for all to hear, her inbred sense of loyalty well and truly offended. "I saw Hogwarts respond instantly to his call for assistance, I feel she will also take action against any attempts made to circumvent her champion. I can't help but think Harry being there today, clearly possessing the appropriate training and tools, has further endeared Hogwarts to her chosen champion. You could find yourself out a job headmaster." She gave this a few seconds to sink in before making her own demands. "I also intend to be at this meeting, I want to hear what the lad's father has to say about this."

Minerva remembered what had taken place during her lesson earlier. "There may be more of us looking for a job than you think Pomona. Mr Crow claimed that transfiguration was the easiest form of magic to master - requiring only one spell - and then proceeded to prove it. He turned a book into a chicken with no recognised wand movement or spell incantation."

Snape had been quiet the entire meeting but couldn't hold back at this, his reply was dripping with contempt. "You've obviously been pranked, no first year could do that. The book would have been pre-spelled to transfigure on command."

The Hogwarts Deputy was in no mood to mollycoddle anyone's feelings and ripped right into the potions professor. "I am well aware of how that prank works Severus, which is why I gave him a book that belonged to me and determined the item I wanted the lad to transfigure it into. He also further transfigured the chicken into a woven basket and finally a kitten, all by the same method."

Albus seized at this opportunity to turn the subject away from his relentless verbal castigation. "And just how did Mr Crow accomplish this feat? Surely not by wandless magic?"

"He used his knife..." Minerva had to hold her hand up to prevent the interruptions that she could see coming from Albus and Severus. "The lad knew the ministry interpretation of what constituted a wand verbatim. Is there anyone here who doesn't believe Mr Crow's knife will not break any of the ministry's guidelines of just what they define a wand as? When you take into account that his knife was a personal gift from Ragnok, then you can guarantee it will fall outside ministerial law."

Snape couldn't stand the son of his former schooldays enemy receiving praise. "If he's so bloody good at magic, why did he have to kill a troll with a sword? I would have expected him to tie it up in pink ribbons and bows, just waiting on us coming to collect it."

"And just how many eleven year olds do you know who could take down a fully grown mountain troll?" Filius wasn't for letting Snape or Dumbledore off with anything. "Can I assume from your attitude that you don't want to be part of this meeting tomorrow?"

"The brat has made it perfectly clear that he wants nothing to do with me, well the feeling is mutual. No, I will not be at that meeting. Excuse me, but the thought of listening to more talk about that boy is making me quite nauseous. I shall retire for the night."

As Snape was leaving, Filius had a parting comment for the potions professor. "I think the problem is young Harry made it PUBLICLY clear he wanted nothing to do with you, just remember that Severus. Harry has already proven my earlier statement correct, never mess with a goblin."

As Snape left, Minerva once more turned the argument back to Dumbledore. "So headmaster, are you going to tell us this prophecy - or are we going to have to ask a goblin about it tomorrow?"

Albus could only stall his senior staff, and hope the goblin would tell them nothing tomorrow. He was beginning to regret arranging that meeting, the timing of it just couldn't be worse.

-oOoOo-

Harry came down the stairs with the intention of carrying out his normal morning exercise routine, he found an unexpected sight waiting on him.

Hermione had fallen asleep on a chair turned to face his staircase, obviously intent on not letting him get past her. It should also have been obvious from her attire what the young witch's intentions were but Harry had never seen clothing like this. The shorts came down to just above her knees and clung to Hermione like a blue and pink second skin. The short sleeved top was of the same colourful design and material, clinging to her every curve while exposing part of her midriff. Chunky footwear completed the ensemble, all made of something called Nike, and she had even attempted to tie her hair back into a ponytail.

Hermione's mane could never be tamed by a mere hair-tie and was already escaping to cover her face. Harry gently moved the escaped locks away from her eyes, only for those expressive hazel orbs to shoot open.

Harry would later swear he didn't see Hermione move but she must have, how else could she now be standing and wrapped all around him.

"Oh Harry, you've no idea how happy I am to see you're alright. You walked out the infirmary covered in blood and I was sure some of it must be yours. Madam Pomfrey had to practically force-feed me a calming draft to stop me chasing after you, she said we were all suffering from shock and kept us in her apartment while the infirmary was being repaired and fumigated. She let us out at dinner time and then I couldn't find you anywhere, no one could. Where were you?"

Harry had thought he had lost his friends but, if the way Hermione was clinging to him was any indication, that was clearly not the case. "I was in my room, I thought you wouldn't want to be my friend after what I did yesterday."

Hermione took his face in her hands, ensuring he could look into her eyes as she answered that question. "What you did yesterday was the bravest thing I've ever seen. We were all terrified yet you took command of the situation. I saw and heard you try to get the troll away from us, it didn't leave you any other option."

"You looked as if you would never want to see me again, as if I frightened you."

"You scared the bloody life out of me! I thought that troll was sure to kill you. The smell in the infirmary was atrocious, there was blood splattered everywhere and Padma was actually shooting slugs from her mouth as she screamed - not one of life's better experiences!"

A shiver ran down Hermione just thinking about it. Harry must have felt it because he held her tighter, giving the young witch the courage to say the next bit "I actually couldn't believe we all survived and just stood there in shock, it wasn't until Madam Pomfrey began to treat us I realised you had left. I'm sorry if you thought that Harry, I can assure you nothing could be further from the truth."

"So Padma and her sister don't hate me?"

This had Hermione blushing and really piqued Harry's curiosity. He held the silence until she eventually answered his question. "The twins seemed to think they now owe you a life debt - Parvati saw both of them marrying you as the perfect way to repay this debt."

Harry struggled to hold his laughter as he pushed for more. "I saved you as well, what does Hermione Granger think of this idea?"

"Oh, Parvati had thought of that as well. I was to marry you too - and become part of your harem..."

Harry couldn't hold his laughter any longer, much to the consternation of Miss Granger. "I hardly see how that is funny Harry..."

"Oh you would, if you knew more about goblins." Harry regained control of his laughter before giving Hermione the information she was missing. "Goblins have one mate - and that mate is for life. No goblin would ever take part in a multiple relationship like she's suggesting. I would really appreciate it if my best friend made sure certain others got to hear about that fact."

For some reason this put a wide smile on Hermione's face, Harry reckoned that now would be a good time to ask what was on his mind. "Hermione, what are you wearing?"

The pink tinge had once more returned to her features. "Oh this is my mother's idea of exercise clothes. I had hoped for jogging bottoms and a hoodie, a track suit even. Mother has to go and buy spandex, so it was this or robes. Shall I go and change?"

"No, those are great. They won't restrict your movement in the slightest." What Harry didn't say was holding her dressed like that felt really different - but in a good way.

This gave Hermione the opening she was looking for. "Okay, so we know I'm wearing spandex but I've never seen anything like you've got on. What is it?"

"You never want to see this either. My tunic is made from the hide of a Hebridean Black, one of the few species of dragon native to Britain."

Hermione was running her hands over his chest without realising quite what she was doing. "This is dragon skin? It feels soft yet tough at the same time."

"Yes...well...it provides protection... against spells or blades." Harry was almost stuttering before pulling himself together. "Do you want to do some training? I think we should just start with a light run this morning?"

This was quickly agreed upon and they left the common room, Hermione once more on Harry's arm.

-oOoOo-

Padma 'found' Hermione sitting on the stairs and had to help the clearly exhausted witch reach her room. "What happened to you?"

"Oh I went training with Harry. His idea of a light workout was a three mile run, my legs gave out halfway up the stairs. I really need to shower and get ready but I don't think I can."

Padma had an idea how to get her friend moving. "That's too bad, Parvati will have the story of what happened yesterday all over the castle by now. My sister is quite taken with your best friend, she'll probably be sitting on Harry's lap before breakfast is over."

The exhausted witch suddenly found reserves she didn't know she possessed. Hermione didn't see Padma's smile as she hurried past her smirking friend for a quick shower.

-oOoOo-

Hermione entered the great hall on Harry's arm as usual, but that was where 'usual' ended. Padma hadn't been joking about her twin sister. Harry's exploits from yesterday were now known by everyone, which probably explained why everyone was now staring at them.

Harry had just sat down between Hermione and Padma when they were approached by the other Patil sister.

"Mr Crow, I would like to formally acknowledge that I owe you a life debt."

The rest of the great hall didn't even bother pretending that they weren't listening to every word, they easily heard Harry's reply. "I'm sorry Miss Patil, but I can't accept that."

Parvati was rocked on her heels at Harry's answer, it was certainly not what she expected. "Why not? There's no question that you saved my life."

"Actually, I rushed to the infirmary to make sure my friends were okay, you just happened to be there too. Goblins always look out for their friends and family, there can be no debts between Hermione, Padma or I for doing so."

It was a downtrodden Parvati that headed back to the Gryffindor table, fighting to hold back the tears. Harry wasn't exactly sure what he'd done and asked Padma if she could explain it to him.

"You basically told Parvati that if we weren't in the infirmary, you wouldn't have come racing to the rescue."

Harry nodded at that. "If you and Hermione had been in the hall yesterday, I wouldn't have gone anywhere. I didn't go looking for the troll, I went looking for the both of you. The troll just happened to find us, and Parvati just happened to be there too. I can't accept a life



debt for that. I certainly didn't mean to offend your sister though, and I'm still not sure how I did."

Hermione attempted to help him understand. "Harry, you have no idea just what a heroic figure you appeared yesterday. You were decisive, calm and the way you protected us was terrifying to watch. That troll was enormous yet you felled it like a tree the instant it got too close. Parvati is just upset that you didn't perform your heroics to rescue her."

"I think I see. Padma, please tell your sister that I may have raced there to ensure you and Hermione were safe but I would have protected anyone from that troll. Well, perhaps I would have let it beat up Malfoy or Weasley for a while before I stopped it."

Padma knew it was more a case of her sister had never had to play second fiddle to her before. Hearing that Harry had raced to the infirmary to see that she was safe, after publicly clobbering the Weasley boy for hitting her with a spell in the first place, would be a shock to Parvati's system. When she put it all together like that, it was a shock to Padma's too.

Seeing that the morning entertainment appeared to be over, Roger asked Harry a question that everyone wanted to know the answer to. "Harry, why did you use Gryffindor's sword on that troll?"

"Oh, my knife wasn't quite big enough to bring it down - pass those sausages over please Hermione?"

That ended all questions on the subject, no Ravenclaw could fault logic like that. As the noise level in the hall returned to what passed for normal at mealtimes, Harry had a question to ask both his friends.

"My father is coming to Hogwarts today, would you like to meet him?"

Hermione and Padma both said yes at once, putting a wide smile on Harry's face. That smile just got wider as Professor Flitwick entered the great hall, accompanied by a goblin Harry clearly knew.

No one in the hall was quite sure what to make of the boy-who-lived getting to his feet before respectfully bowing to a goblin. "Well met Master Pitslay, it really is a pleasure to see you again. I had no idea

who my father had arranged to tutor potions and am delighted you have made the journey here."

"Well met Harry Crow - yes your father asked me to use that name while you are inside Hogwarts. I was hardly likely to let some wizard ruin all the hard work I had expended on your potions tuition. Master Flitwick has kindly arranged a classroom that should meet our needs, though I understand we have a few more students wishing to learn potions properly?"

"Yes Master Pitslay, three of my friends. Will that be acceptable?"

"That will be fine. If they prove adequate, we might add a few more as the weeks progress."

This proved too much for Snape who stormed out the great hall. Hogwarts students being taught potions by a goblin! He would have to take some action about that. Minerva McGonagall felt she needed to take some action too. She approached the group and Filius introduced her.

After the pleasantries, Minerva got right down to business. A trait that would endear her to anyone of goblin decent. "Master Pitslay, as Deputy Headmistress, I would like to observe you teaching our students this morning. Please understand, I mean no slight on your capabilities. Certain others might cast aspersions on you teaching at Hogwarts, I will be able to deal with them in my official capacity if I have witnessed your lesson first hand."

The goblin bowed slightly to McGonagall. "I look forward to your company professor, and thank you for your honesty and forethought."

Neither Hermione, Padma or Neville had a problem cutting their breakfast short so Professor Flitwick could lead them all to the classroom set aside for their potions lessons. After watching the way Snape had stormed out of the hall, missing lunch and dinner too would have been a small price to pay. If the longing looks they received from three quarters of the other first years were any indication, they clearly thought so too.

-oOoOo-

Minerva sat at the back of the class, not sure what to expect. If Harry's transfiguration tuition was any indicator, then she needed to be ready for anything. What she didn't expect was the children being told to put their books away before being handed a different one from their new professor. Pitslay was kind enough to hand her a copy too.

"Now I feel we must lay a few ground rules down here before we start, give you some idea of what to expect from me as your teacher. First of all, I intend to be finished the first year course before your next holiday." Pitslay let that statement sink in before continuing. "I intend to achieve this by not wasting both our times continually brewing different potions just so you learn one specific procedure or technique. When I teach you something, I expect you to remember it first time."

Harry had heard all of this before but enjoyed watching his friends nod in agreement with that last statement.

"Secondly, I won't be issuing what would properly be called homework. I don't care if you can write me a three foot essay on how you would brew something, I would much rather we spent our time ensuring you can actually brew that specific potion. That, boys and girls, is what I class as homework. Each week I will tell you the potion that you are going to be brewing the next time you see me. Your task then is to research all the steps, procedures and ingredients to the stage where you can brew it perfectly. The books I've just given you should be extremely helpful with each task."

Minerva thought the goblin teacher's expectations were too high, until she opened the book Pitslay had given her. That the potion formula and brewing procedure were clearly laid out was to be expected. What she'd never seen before was the wealth of additional information provided in a reference section that was easily two thirds of the entire book.

Pitslay took them through just what he expected, clearly showing each student how to glean the information on every ingredient and why they must follow the steps exactly. The goblin demonstrated each step of the procedure, actually brewing the potion himself. He encouraged them to ask questions but, instead of answering them, preferred to lead them whenever possible through the book so they could discover the correct answer for themselves.

Hermione though had a question that required a direct answer. "Sir, why is Harry's book so much thicker than ours?"

"Mr Crow already has a few years of my tuition under his belt, hence will be working on a different potion next week. Pages are added to your books as your skills increase. If things progress as I hope, your books should all be updated before December ends. There is a high probability that our numbers will increase. At that time, you three will be working on whatever potion I have assigned you, while Harry works on another. Any newcomers will of course start at the beginning, it is perfectly normal in a goblin classroom to have students working at different levels. Once you have brewed a few potions, I shall see where we go from there."

The lunch bell surprised everyone, including Minerva. She hadn't intended to spend the entire lesson here, only enough time to ensure the students were being taught to the same standard as the rest of their yearmates. She found the handout to be one of the best educational textbooks she'd ever seen and the teaching method fascinating. Minerva could see the positive implications of this, Severus was always complaining about expensive ingredients being reduced to sludge or cauldrons melted by dunderheaded students. It would be very interesting to compare the two methods. She really only had one question.

"Master Pitslay, what do you do when a student arrives at class clearly not having carried out the preparation work you set them?"

The little goblin seemed affronted at that question. "No student of mine would ever dare!"

Harry quickly covered for McGonagall's unintentional gaff. "Master Pitslay is the foremost potion brewer in goblin society. It is such an honour to be tutored by him that his statement is of course correct. There is no way a student of his would arrive for class unprepared. Their tutoring would come to a swift end, and the disgrace of that would follow them for the rest of their lives."

Hermione, Padma and Neville certainly had no intention of ever arriving unprepared. Not only would that mean letting Harry down, their only other alternative was Snape. They may not have done any brewing here today but all now felt confident they could make the

required potion next week. For Neville, that was really saying something.

-oOoOo-

As they walked back to the great hall, McGonagall spotted another goblin standing there waiting with Filius. The Deputy Headmistress also spotted something that warmed her heart. Just for a few seconds, Harry had let his mask slip and Minerva was delighted at what she saw displayed there. Here was a young boy, away from home for the first time in his life, laying eyes on a loved parent. Having observed the Dursleys all those years ago, she really couldn't imagine Harry ever having the same kind of reaction to seeing his aunt and uncle. This was her first indication that Harry growing up with the goblins was a good solution to that young orphan's problem.

Hermione was on Harry's arm and could literally feel the excitement course through him as he spotted the goblin who must be his father. She was practically dragged in that direction.

"Well met father, how are you today?"

"All the better for seeing you, my son." Barchoke was smiling inside at the young girl on his son's arm, though of course none of it showed on his face. "Will you introduce me to your friends?"

"This is Hermione Granger, Padma Patil and Neville Longbottom. This is my father, Senior Accounts Manager, Barchoke."

Hermione paid no notice Barchoke's classic pinstriped suit, that he was slightly shorter than his son or had pointy ears. Harry called him father and that was more than good enough for her. The young Ravenclaw immediately offered her hand in greeting, saying "pleased to meet you sir"

Padma and Neville took their lead from Hermione and offered the same greeting. Barchoke couldn't remember the last time he'd shaken a witch or wizard's hand, his son had chosen his friends well. "Master Flitwick has arranged for us to lunch together before our meeting with the headmaster, the meeting will now be joined by some of the senior staff too."

Harry was well aware it wasn't considered polite to switch to the goblin language in the company of those who didn't understand it, he was also aware certain situations called for it. He considered this one of those situations. "'Father, can my friends join us for lunch? I feel they really need to know important information about me.'"

This caught Barchoke on the hop, his son hadn't been gone a week yet wanted to tell these friends his secret? He was delighted his son had a best friend, that she was muggle born was in many ways a bonus. That was a side of the world that he was ill equipped to teach his son anything about, but this was moving way too fast. "'Are you sure about this Harry? Once told, you can't take it back?'"

Harry nodded determinedly, "'The girls were almost killed yesterday, I was forced to slay a troll that was trying to bludgeon them to death.'"

Barchoke's mask slipped at that, he practically growled at Harry's head of house. "'You shall be explaining that to me later - and why I was not contacted immediately!'"

Hermione had been surprised when Harry started speaking what she could only guess was the goblin language, that was nothing though to watching his father's public face slip for a second. She remembered Harry telling her his father had fought two duels to the death to protect him, she now had no problem believing that. Public face back fully in place, he then switched effortlessly to English.

"Harry has asked that his friends join us for lunch, I would be delighted with that. I certainly want to know more about his friends, and especially what happened yesterday." The goblin's last phrase was said in a harder tone, and specifically aimed at McGonagall.

Minerva quickly responded. "Sir, I'll be more than happy to answer any and all questions you may have at the meeting. I'm hoping you may answer some of mine?"

The concerned father gave a slight nod at that. "I hope we can cooperate but please be assured, the safety of my son will always be paramount in any discussions we have. I was not aware that fighting trolls was actually part of the Hogwarts curriculum? If this is the best your school has to offer, it will be a short meeting and my son will be returning home with me."

Harry felt Hermione's fingers dig into his arm at that, he placed his hand over hers to offer some reassurance. He was pretty sure his father was bluffing, he was also pretty sure he was the only one there who thought so. Harry was certain his father's words would get back to the headmaster before the meeting, which was his father's entire reason for speaking them here.

They were led into a room set up for lunch and Harry invited Master Flitwick to join them, alerting his father that their head of house should be considered an ally in what was to come. Barchoke responded in kind by offering some comfort to the young girl who was clearly building herself up into a state of distress.

"Please don't trouble yourself Miss Granger. Should Harry leave Hogwarts, arrangement would be made to ensure he stayed in contact with his best friend."

"Oh thank you sir, but Harry already knows my feelings..."

"Hermione, before you say anymore, there is something I need to tell you. I need to tell all of you." Harry had just sat at the table with Hermione and Padma either side of him, his father now sat opposite and nodded his acceptance of the situation. "What I'm about to say may make a difference to where we go from here. You all heard the sorting hat call me prophesied one, well the prophecy in question concerns me and Voldemort. He's not dead, and will be coming after me."

It was Flitwick who broke the silence that followed Harry's revelation. Having just had the worst fears of the senior staff confirmed, it was time to declare whose side he was on. "This is not for repeating outside this room, Voldemort was in the castle yesterday. He possessed Professor Quirrell and let the troll into the castle."

Harry shared a glance with his father before continuing. "We didn't think he would be able to stage a return for a few years yet, this is why I just had to tell you. Being around me could be dangerous..."

Harry found himself confronted by a witch determined to get her point across. Hermione was so determined, she was sitting on his lap with her face mere inches from his. "You listen to me Crow, it's taken me nearly twelve years to find a best friend. If you think for

one second that I'm going to give that up then the hat was wrong to put you in Ravenclaw!"

Barchoke now thought his son had made the right decision as he watched Harry's arms snake around the young witch. It was heartwarming to watch as these two drew comfort from each other while the rest of his friends quickly supported him.

Padma was in Ravenclaw for all the right reasons, and used that claw reasoning to convey to Harry she wasn't going anywhere. "You say I may be in danger if I stay your friend, I say I would be dead if I wasn't. You said it yourself Harry, you only raced to the infirmary because your friends were there. We all know the professors would have gotten to the infirmary too late to do anything but clean up the mess. I'll take the danger because I think I'm far safer, and certainly happier as your friend."

Neville was blushing but determined to prove the same hat had put him in Gryffindor for a reason. "My reason is more like Hermione's, though without the hugs. It's taken me a long time to make any friends, and that's a lot to give up. Besides, you told me we're practically family. I wouldn't be much of a family if I ran away now."

Hermione had such a tight hold of Harry she could feel the tension leave his body as they all declared they were going nowhere. She sat back, still on his knee, to ask the next question. "Okay, that explains all the training and tutors. Now, have you anything else to let slip or can we eat our lunch? I never knew running in the morning could give you such an appetite and we cut breakfast short."

As Miss Granger slipped into her own seat and began eating her lunch, Barchoke lost it. Both Harry's letters home had been full of this young witch, and he had a good idea of just how apprehensive his son was about telling her the prophecy. Seeing her reaction to the news caused Barchoke to burst out laughing. "Son, I heartily approve of your friends. Miss Granger, no matter what happens here today, you can rest assured you will be in Harry's life as long as you both want that to be so."

The relief amongst the young people was palpable, now all Barchoke needed was the meeting with the headmaster to go as well. First though, he wanted to hear how his son had taken out a troll.



A/N Thanks for reading.

## Chapter 6

Albus glanced down at his now unwanted lunch and reckoned losing weight was the least of his troubles. Minerva's news had once more robbed him of his appetite. "Are you certain Barchoke was serious about removing Harry from Hogwarts? Filius said the boy was sent here to mingle with his peers."

His deputy attempted to get across the seriousness of the situation. "When Barchoke heard about yesterday, he appeared ready to behead Filius in the entrance hall. Barchoke may have sent Harry here to mingle with his peers, having his son forced to kill a troll to save his friends was never part of the deal."

The headmaster was a shrewd enough negotiator to know that going into any meeting where the other party held all the cards was not conducive to getting the result you wanted. Albus couldn't think of one single thing he had to bargain with. There was more than that disturbing him though, Harry had terrified him yesterday. "I just can't get past the image of that young boy casually wiping the blood off his sword, using the vest of the troll he'd just killed. He's certainly not what I expected."

Pomona just had to comment on that. "The first year timetable sees me teaching Harry more than anyone else, a miniature James Potter he's not. The lad is polite, courteous and shows no sign of the arrogance that plagued his father at the same age. He is also physically taller and certainly broader than the skinny boy an eleven year old James was. He's already attracting the attention of witches a few years older than him."

Minerva had to chip in her two knuts worth into the pot too. "I saw the pair greet one another before heading off to lunch, Don't doubt for a second that there is not a very close father / son relationship present between Harry and Barchoke. I'm starting to think that Dursley did the right thing by taking the child to Gringotts."

This drew some looks of disbelief from her colleagues, Minerva though was not for changing her opinion. "I watched those muggles for a full day and protested against Harry being left there in the first place. The fact that they gave the child away proves I was right. It would seem to be pure luck that Harry appears to have been raised in a nourishing environment."

An upset potions professor put his knife and fork down. "You seem determined to deny me the same nourishment. All this talk about that brat is ruining my appetite again." Severus' sarcasm valve was stuck on fully open, he was not having a good Friday. "I intend to complain to the board of governors about the alternative potions class that took place this morning..."

He wasn't given time to properly get into his rant as Minerva cut him off with a question. "On what grounds do you intend to complain?"

Severus was staring at the deputy as if she had just asked the stupidest question he'd ever heard. "Are you serious Minerva? Potions being taught inside Hogwarts by a goblin, the board will never allow that. It's degrading to the rest of the staff..."

Again Minerva jumped all over him. "I am reliably informed that Master Pitslay is the premier potions master of the goblin nation. After observing him teach a class this morning, I am confident the students he teaches will be at the very least on par with the best that your class produces." From the pained expression on his face, you could be forgiven for thinking Severus had a fish bone lodged in his throat. His mouth was open and moving but no decipherable sound was coming out. "You also need to take into account that Augusta Longbottom is a very influential member of that board, and her grandson is one of Pitslay's students. Did I mention Hogwarts latest tutor hopes to be finished the first year curriculum before Christmas?"

To Severus, here was proof that this goblin had no idea what he was taking on. "Good luck with that! Weasley just managed to melt the first cauldron of the year, I fear it won't be his last as following simple instructions appears beyond him. The only reason he's not spending the evening in detention with me is because he apparently has a prior detention with you."

Since Severus decided to bring up one of her cubs at lunch, Minerva thought some retaliation should be on the menu. The Head of Gryffindor knew just how to tweak his large nose some more. "Mr Crow has obviously been having private potions tuition for a while now, Pitslay has him brewing the wit-sharpening potion next week. If I'm not mistaken, that's usually done near the end of fourth year?"

That was all it took to see the potion master's napkin hit the table, the very thought of James Potter's offspring as a potions protégé was enough to see Severus heading back to his dungeon. Dumbledore was only partially paying attention to what was happening between three of his heads of house, most of the headmaster's attention was still on what to do at the meeting after lunch. This had the potential to be bad, Harry - whatever he wanted to call himself - leaving Hogwarts would be a disaster.

-oOoOo-

Filius led the father and son to the headmaster's office and handled all the introductions. Barchoke sat with Harry beside him, waiting to see what happened here. Dumbledore had requested this meeting, before the troll incident took place, so the first move was his.

Albus was left really with only one choice. When your opponent held the stronger hand, your options were either bluff or fold. Folding was not an option here so bluff it was.

"On behalf of the witches and wizards of Britain, I would like to offer our sincere thanks for doing such a superb job of raising young Harry here. I feel it's time though that Harry Potter returned to the magical society and asked you here today to discuss if we can reach some sort of agreement on how this could be achieved."

"I'm sorry headmaster, that's just not possible..."

"Oh come now Barchoke, of course it's possible. I've been holding back the press and the ministry from interfering but I don't know for how much longer I'll be able to manage that."

The answer Albus got was as unexpected as the source it came from. The anger and venom in the voice of one so young was certainly disturbing, but the information given out was what really startled the headmaster. "Bring it on Dumbledore! I'm sure the press, and the ministry would like to know how I was dumped on a muggle doorstep. A letter tucked in my blanket and Voldemort's horcrux in my head. A really stellar decision from the leader of the light that night, a decision he had no legal right to make!"

Pomona couldn't miss that her three shocked colleagues were turning shades of grey or green, she needed more information. "Just what is a horcrux?"

Harry's voice was once more respectful as he answered the head of Hufflepuff's question. "It's some of the darkest magic known professor, to split your soul and store part of it in a separate container requires you to commit murder as part of the ritual. After he killed James and Lily Potter, something strange happened and I ended up with a bit of Voldemort's soul attached to me. This is something Voldemort's obviously deliberately done more than once too, and he can't be truly killed while a part of his soul still survives. My father took me straight to a goblin healer to have the piece in me removed and then destroyed, why didn't you do that headmaster?"

Minerva was remembering that night as if it was yesterday because Dumbledore's words had struck a chord with her. She had instinctively known something wasn't right but had accepted his assurances at face value. Minerva shouted his own words back at Albus. "Even if I could, I wouldn't. Scars can come in handy! That's what you said - though you never did say what it would be handy for? You knew there was a horcrux inside that bairn and yet you did nothing about it?"

"I had but a mere suspicion, and I was not aware that a procedure existed to successfully remove a horcrux from a living host. Usually they would be imbedded in an inanimate object that would need to be destroyed." Dumbledore attempted to redirect the anger in the room at a different target than him. "What I'm more concerned about here is that an eleven year old knows about the foulest dark magic imaginable - what kind of a parent are you that would teach a child that?"

Harry was on his feet, ready to defend his father against all comers, when he felt a familiar hand on his shoulder. "Remember your training son, this is why you work so hard."

Everyone could see Harry take a deep breath and regain control of his emotions. He sat back down and apologised. "Sorry father. Losing your temper loses your focus, losing your focus can cost you the battle. It's hard to sit here though and listen to this old fraud berate you when his crimes should have seen him in Azkaban."

Barchoke turned his attention to the rest of the company. "My son is of course correct. An infant had been hit with the killing curse yet you didn't even arrange for a healer to check his health. Instead of being cared for, the saviour of magical Britain gets taken to the Dursleys by the Hogwarts groundkeeper..."

"I trust Hagrid with my life!"

"From a man with no honour, I'll treat that statement with the contempt it deserves. It also hasn't escaped my notice that you refuse to offer a defence as to the illegality of your actions that night, could that be because they are indefensible? My son is well aware of his past - and what the future holds for him. It's clear to me this is information that you also hold but have chosen not to reveal to even your closest comrades."

Dumbledore couldn't believe this was all coming out today. His words to Severus were proving to be true, this boy knew far too much. "This information should not be known by mere children..."

Barchoke growled his question at Dumbledore. "Even though a child managed to do what you could not? My son is prophesied to be the only one who can defeat Voldemort yet you would have him raised by muggles until he was eleven. We have to ask the question why?"

That was one question he had no intention of ever answering, Albus once more attempted to turn the argument back onto the goblin. "You are training a human child to be a warrior for the goblin nation, I've heard of nothing but training and lessons. I wanted him to have a normal childhood..."

Harry just had to butt in at that. "How was a normal childhood going to enable me to defeat a dark wizard that's already had the country on its knees once before?"

"The prophecy states you will have a power the dark lord knows not - I believe that power to be love!"

Albus now had everyone in the room staring at him in disbelief, it was left to Harry to come up with a reply. "No wonder he was so upset when I killed the troll, the headmaster probably wanted me to give it a hug and make everything all better. Is that what you had

planned for my confrontation with Voldemort, kiss him to death? Sorry but no chance, I intend my first kiss to be with a girl."

"Now you're just being silly Mr Crow..."

"What? And you were serious with that love dragoncrap? I think we've heard all we need to, don't you father? There is nothing for us here."

Barchoke nodded with pride at his son. "Just to address your earlier point headmaster, you and I can't 'do a deal' on my son returning to the wizarding community. The reason for my refusal is that the entire issue will be purely Harry's decision. That decision will not be influenced by me, and certainly not by you. Know this though, whatever decision he makes, Harry will have my full support and always be my son. A son I'm very proud of."

The proud father now had their undivided attention. He'd just announced his son was the only person who could defeat Voldemort and they were waiting to see if Harry would be staying at Hogwarts. "I came here today - at your request - to discuss my son's future. A normal childhood sounds idyllic, until that is it equates to my son being dead before he's out of his teens. Without his lessons and training, neither Harry nor his friends would have made their teens. They would have perished under the club of a troll in the Hogwarts infirmary - all while supposedly in your care! I had hoped we could reach an agreement here today, not on what's best for me or you Dumbledore but for Harry. Clearly that is not something you are prepared to do headmaster, therefore I will have to look elsewhere."

Minerva couldn't decide whether she was going to tear Dumbledore a new one or throw up her lunch and make his robes even more colourful. The Deputy Headmistress was also having trouble deciding if today's meeting could have went any worse. She desperately wanted to get out of that office but had something that needed to be said first. "I shall show you out sir, the air in here is suddenly tasting rather foul. I feel I must offer my apologies for the small part I played in your son being deposited with the Dursleys. In my defence I will say I objected strongly to him being left there at all, and the headmaster also waived aside my concerns over young Harry's scar."

This was better than Barchoke had hoped for, here was an opening the goblin intended to exploit. Hogwarts making Harry her champion had really just confirmed what they at Gringotts had already suspected, Harry's future was in some way tied to Hogwarts. Here was his chance to deal with the deputy, and exclude the headmaster entirely from those discussions. Now Barchoke could keep Harry in the castle and stick it to Dumbledore's pride at the same time. That was all good to the goblin. "I accept your apology and would appreciate the chance to talk with you professor, it will give me the opportunity to make arrangements for my son and his friends to also receive private defence lessons. As I just stated, I have no faith in the headmaster or his decisions. I doubt if he will be able to find a competent replacement for the one that was possessed by Voldemort."

Albus wanted to demand to know how they had obtained that information but was too relieved at learning that Harry obviously wasn't leaving the school to complain.

Barchoke though had a parting comment for the headmaster. "With regard to your threat of the press or ministry, my son was one hundred percent correct. Bring it on Dumbledore. It should be obvious by now that we, unlike you, have nothing to hide. I will agree that Voldemort making horcruxes is not something we want on the front page of the Prophet, or banded about the ministry."

The goblin didn't want Dumbledore to think he agreed with anything else the old wizard was up to, his last comment ensured that message came across. "On the other hand, you are no longer a young wizard. What would happen if you should pass away and no one else had access to the information you fanatically hold to yourself? Do you even have a contingency plan in place or are you so conceited as to think only you could possibly achieve what needs to be done?"

This was all Barchoke intended to say on the matter. McGonagall then left with the father and son, both she and Barchoke now turning their attention to arranging a defence tutor for the Monday's and Thursday's that the first year Ravensclaws were timetabled for that subject.

Filius could hardly contain himself long enough to let Minerva lead them out, they could barely have made the bottom of the staircase



before he rounded on Dumbledore. "After all my warnings, you tried to bully Barchoke into relinquishing his son?"

There was disbelief in Filius' tone but anger was easily the dominant emotion detectable in his voice. "If that didn't convince me you were at the very least delusional, your 'power of love' comment certainly did. I believe Barchoke when he said he came to Hogwarts today to see if there was any way he could work with you to help his son, both just left here knowing that to be impossible. That boy has, by any standard, already led an extraordinary life - he's not yours to do with as you please."

Dumbledore was getting fed-up with people thinking they could speak to him whatever way they wanted. "Don't overstep the mark here Filius! Remember, you work for me."

"Actually, I work for Hogwarts. Please let me know by the end of the day if you want to take any action that changes that status, I've just heard of a defence tuition position becoming available that greatly interests me. I can also guarantee the lessons would not be held in Hogwarts, Barchoke would have Harry following me right out the door." Filius left behind a clearly angry Dumbledore as he stormed from the office.

Pomona attempted to make Albus see sense regarding this matter. "The lad will now be receiving private tuition for two of his subjects, potions and defence. Add to that, Minerva will need to figure out exactly how he performs his transfiguration before she can be of any help and you've just pissed-off the lad's head of house and charms professor. Albus, you're hanging on to Mr Crow by the skin of your teeth." She had a wry smile at her next observation. "I doubt I could get anyone to bet against what will happen the first time Binns mentions 'goblin rebellion'. Can you even doubt there will be a private history tutor on their way to Hogwarts too? That class might just have all four houses clamouring to join."

Albus knew all this, it was also only a matter of time before the press and the ministry were crawling all over this situation as well. Pomona then tried a different tact. "I've known you for over two decades Albus, so my position on this matter should not be a surprise to you. On the one hand I have a wizard who clearly doesn't trust me yet expects instant obedience to his somewhat questionable actions. Of all the staff in Hogwarts, the only person

you have shown a modicum of trust in is the most sour, spiteful and petty man it has ever been my displeasure to teach alongside. Do I need a dark mark on my arm and claim repentance before you decide I might be allowed to know anything of importance?"

She could see her barbs were hitting their target so Pomona continued. "On the other hand, a goblin I've just met trusted me with information that could rock our world. He did this clearly in an attempt to gain my support for his son. Since that same boy is the one prophesied to fight Voldemort, then you must know he already has mine. I could never support a dark lord so my position on this is crystal clear, I will do everything in my power to help Mr Crow achieve the result we all want. Minerva and Filius will certainly reach the same conclusion that I have, we just can't understand why you are not standing squarely beside us?"

His half-moon glasses were currently lying on his desk while Albus tiredly rubbed his eyes. "Of course I want to see the end of Voldemort but the issue is not as black and white as it's being painted. Prophecies are at best vague, being fully understood only after their completion. The actual prophecy doesn't say who will win, only that one must kill the other. Watching that young boy so casually taking a life terrifies me more than I can say. The last thing we need is for one dark lord to be defeated, only to be replaced by another - this one with full Gringotts backing and a goblin agenda."

Pomona wasn't standing for that analogy. "If my choice is between Voldemort or a young man who calls a goblin father and has a muggle born witch for a best friend - again not a difficult decision for me. Sometimes you just have to trust your instincts Albus, and mine are all screaming at me to help that boy any way I can. Ten years ago we miraculously escaped the dark alternative, I never want to go back down that road again."

"Do you honestly think that child can defeat Voldemort?"

"He did it before Albus, and that was without a sword. Hogwarts obviously knew about the prophecy and still made Harry her champion. If you can't trust Hogwarts then I'm afraid there really is no hope for you. That's not to say the boy won't need all the help he can get, and you could probably help him more than most. Take a long look in the mirror Albus, and then decide if you can live with yourself if you don't support Harry."

Pomona left the old wizard to his thoughts, Albus was sitting at his desk with his head in his hands.

-oOoOo-

Ron Weasley had a scrubbing brush in his hands, cleaning out a boy's toilet. The brush was certainly a more effective tool than his now held together with spellotape wand.

Long before he boarded the Hogwarts Express, the youngest Weasley male was well aware that the boy-who-lived would be in the same Hogwarts year as him. Ron had been certain they would both be in Gryffindor together, and surely best friends before Halloween. The strong smell of disinfectant seemed to emphasise that, like everything else in his life, even his dreams turned to shit.

His only meagre crumb of comfort was that this detention got him out of one with Snape. Potions today had been a nightmare, and Ron couldn't see that improving any time soon. Having to listen during dinner while Neville prattled to Parvati about just how good his potions lesson had been almost gave Ron indigestion. The part about no homework was the clincher though, something had to be done.

He'd tried to charm his way into the boy-who-lived's good graces, Ron had been very firmly and publicly rejected. It was time to try more devious methods, namely his twin brothers.

With a broken wand, two weeks' worth of detention and losing Gryffindor fifty points - family honour needed to be defended here. Ron was positive he could spin the story to get his brothers unleashing a prank war against a certain first year. That should see Ron getting what he wanted before he called off the twins. An invitation to join the very exclusive club that was potions nirvana - no homework and no Snape!

-oOoOo-

Hermione had actually enjoyed her run this morning, especially after getting confirmation Harry wasn't leaving Hogwarts just yet. They were heading down to breakfast and Padma was teasing her that she may join them for morning exercises. It was actually quite cute

to see just how clueless Harry was as he mistook Padma's teasing about Hermione being alone with him for genuine interest in their morning exercises. Their friend had quietly confided in Hermione last night that no pureblood witch or wizard would ever run for pleasure. Apparently the concepts of keeping fit or jogging hadn't quite taken off in the magical community.

All three were looking forward to doing some exploring after breakfast since this was the start of their first weekend inside Hogwarts. The trio had just taken what was quickly becoming their normal seats when a ghostly head came through the wooden table.

"Good morning to you young champion, allow me to introduce myself. I am Sir Nicholas de Mimsy Porpington, the Gryffindor House ghost. I'm afraid some of my students arranged for your breakfast to be tainted so I wouldn't recommend eating anything at the moment."

All three quickly pushed the food away from them as Harry questioned the ghost. "Sir Nicholas, can you tell me who did this?"

"Oh the Weasley twins are notorious pranksters, beginning to rival even your father and his friends..."

Their conversation was interrupted there by loud laughter emanating from the Gryffindor table. One glance was all Harry needed before the three of them headed straight over there. Neville was currently sporting a large pair of donkey ears and was braying every time he attempted to speak.

Ron Weasley was laughing the loudest, certainly not an attractive sight since his mouth was full of food at the time. "Hey Neville, someone made an ass out of you!" He then proceeded to laugh even louder at his own joke.

Harry wasn't laughing, he was furious. As Hermione and Padma took Neville with them to sit at the Ravenclaw table, he headed straight for the headmaster. "Sir, what action are you going to take against this bullying of a first year?"

Albus was beginning to think the fates hated him, why couldn't he be allowed to eat a meal in peace? "Bullying Mr Crow? I think you are

mistaken. This was merely a simple prank, something I can assure you that your father was very fond of."

"You must be mistaken sir, goblins don't believe in pranks. They would look on that as an attack on their person, and react accordingly. Since it was only receiving a warning that stopped me also being a victim, I would still like to know what action you are going to take over this unprovoked attack?"

Severus couldn't take any more of this arrogant boy. "Go back to your table and mind your manners. This is the way young witches and wizards behave inside Hogwarts. If you are so determined to be a goblin, go back to Gringotts where you obviously belong."

Snape's mention of Gringotts reminded Harry of yesterday, and of his training. Now would not be a good time to lose his temper, a different approach was needed here. Harry gave a mocking bow before replying. "Thank you for explaining that to me sir, There is no mention of this pranking phenomenon in either Hogwarts a History or the students handbook. I do not need nor want special treatment and shall just have to do my best to fit in."

Harry walked back to his place at the Ravenclaw table and picked up his knife and fork.

"Harry, what are you doing? Eating that will see you turn the same as Neville."

Harry made sure everyone could hear his answer. "You heard the professor Hermione, this is the way we're supposed to behave. Just because we think this is nothing but juvenile bullying doesn't matter, why should we be treated any different from everyone else?"

She wasn't sure what he was up to until spotting Harry's slight wink. Even though she thought he was nuts, Hermione began eating her breakfast too. As this had now gotten everyone's attention, they all saw Padma join them in breaking their fast. When there were four pranked students sitting at the Ravenclaw table, Ron Weasley's laughter reverberated around the hall. "Told you he was an idiot! Imagine eating food you knew was pranked."

Ron was interrupted by the Head of Hufflepuff. "Ten points each to Mr Crow, Miss Granger and Miss Padma Patil for displaying not only courage, but loyalty to a friend."

Minerva was right behind Pomona, though she was reprimanding one of her cubs. "Mr Weasley, stop braying like a donkey. This isn't a farmyard so please learn some table manners, otherwise you may find yourself with a trough instead of a plate."

These announcements brought widespread applause and saw Harry stand and bow toward both professors, his long ears well worth the price of what he now saw. His head of house must have erected some kind of privacy shield because Master Flitwick was clearly shouting at an angry Snape yet there was no sound. It was a big-eared but satisfied Ravenclaw who now sat back down to finish his breakfast.

The four friends went for a walk outside the castle while waiting on the prank wearing off, their ears were only just beginning their journey back to normal when they were approached by a pair of identical redheads.

"Really well done this morning people, you managed to reverse the prank back on us."

"Yeah, everyone knew who was to blame so we've been getting sniggered at since. Clever way to get most of the hall on your side, that's never happened to us before."

Harry was pleased to discover that his voice was now back to normal. "You know of course that was only the beginning? Goblin honour dictates that I retaliate against you and your brother. We've never met before so it must have been him that put you up to this, big mistake guys."

"What do you make of this George?"

"Yeah, little firstie kills one troll to save a few lives and suddenly thinks he's ready to take on the infamous Weasley twins."

"Don't know what things are coming to? Youngsters today, no respect for their elders."

The one apparently called George became serious for a moment. "Why the hostility toward Ron? If you had to sit beside him at mealtimes we could perhaps understand..."

Harry found himself liking these two, even if they were related to Ron. They both oozed the personality and charm that was sadly lacking in their younger sibling. "Your brother tried to barge his way into our group. When that didn't work, he reached for his wand and fired a curse at Hermione. He couldn't even do that right though and hit Padma instead. That's why the girls were in the infirmary when that troll attacked."

The twins shared a nervous glance, "That's not exactly the story he told us."

Hermione huffed at that news. "Why am I not surprised. Your brother is a jackass yet we all end up with the matching mule ears at breakfast. I'm with Harry for a little payback."

Both twins laugh at this. "Looks like we've got some competition in the pranking stakes, we'll have to watch our food from now on."

"Oh slipping someone a potion is so old school, we four intend to be a little more imaginative than that."

This had the twins laughing again at the audacity of these first years. "Young Harrykins, you've got some nerve."

"Yes, George and I look forward to seeing just what you and your mini-marauders can do."

"Just remember the prankster's motto - Don't Get Caught!"

They walked away leaving the other three all staring at Harry, Padma was first to crack. "You have a plan, right? Even the older Ravenclaws don't mess with the Weasley twins, and apparently for very good reason."

"Relax Padma, we'll just have to unleash our secret weapons on them. Ron Ron, his twin brothers and not forgetting Snape."

This made Neville even more nervous. "Eh, Harry - I'm actually in favour of forgetting all about Snape. If I never have to see him again it will still be too soon."

Padma quickly agreed with Neville but something Harry had said got Hermione thinking. "Wait until we hear what these secret weapons of Harry's are first before we all start panicking."

This earned the witch a smile from her best friend, before he then let them into his ideas. "Well our first secret weapon is Neville, he's our inside man for Gryffindor house - and Weasley payback. Next, I happen to have some recipes for goblin potions that will see Snape sneering out the other side of his face."

Neville was shocked at his friends depending on him, this had never happened before. "What do you need me to do?"

Harry could see Neville was practically shaking with fright but determined to do his best. He quickly reassured the Gryffindor. "All we need is information Neville. Until we know more about them, we won't be able to figure out the best way to get back at the Weasleys. If we were to slip the twins a potion, the entire thing would just escalate. I want to put a stop to this, not make it worse."

They sat beside the Black Lake in the weak September sunshine, throwing ideas in and out of their grand plan. Scheming revenge against those who have wronged you was certainly a pastime worthy of any goblin. It was only when Harry announced what his other secret weapon was though that his friends started to believe they could actually pull this off.

-oOoOo-

Something was certainly off with Fred and George as they entered the Gryffindor common room through the portrait hole later that evening.

"Detention with Filch, I can't believe we got caught."

"That's the least of our worries Fred, the map's stopped working and none of the secret passages would open for us."



"How are we going to cope without access to the kitchens? The only portrait working for us is the Fat Lady."

"Yeah, and even she didn't seem too happy to be opening for us. What is going on?"

George nudged his twin, drawing his attention to the first year sitting holding a book up to hide his face. It was hard to miss that this first year was struggling to hold his laughter, and that was more than enough to raise the twins' suspicions.

"Good book there Neville?"

"Or were you finding something else funny?"

That was too much for the young wizard, the laughter he'd been holding back burst forth.

"Are you getting a bad feeling about this George?"

"Oh yes, brother of mine. Could it be that the mini-marauders have struck back?"

It was a clearly thoughtful Fred Weasley who answered his twin's question. "The timing would suggest that, but I have no idea how they could be involved?"

Between his bouts of laughter, Neville was able to give them a clue. "Hogwarts doesn't like that you decided to prank her champion, the castle is now closed to you."

The horrified look on the twins' faces set Neville's laughter off again.

"Little Harrykins wouldn't do that to us?"

"We have stuff hidden all through the castle, and now we can't get at any of it!"

Both sank onto a sofa as the reality of what Hogwarts working against them meant. "The ghosts told Filch what we were up to..."

"..and the portraits led him straight to us. We're going to get away with nothing!"

Neville was still chuckling to himself as he made his way up to the dorm. He couldn't wait to tell his friends what had just happened, and to see the next part unfold at breakfast tomorrow.

-oOoOo-

Breakfast was Ron's favourite part of the day, closely followed by lunch and dinner. He was unaware that was all about to change. He was just contemplating what to grab for his first course of second helpings when his plate disappeared.

"Hey, I wasn't finished with that!"

This though was only the tip of the iceberg. As Ron reached for more food, the serving platters would disappear before he could get his hands on them, only to reappear once he'd moved back out of range. The guile, effort and determination shown by the boy as he continually attempted to stalk more food was light years away from his lackadaisical performances in all of his classes. Unfortunately, all he had to show for his sterling efforts during the rest of breakfast was providing entertainment value to the other diners. Most of the hall was now laughing at him.

It was left to Neville to deliver the coup de grace. "It would seem that Hogwarts has taken Professor McGonagall's advice to heart. You eat like a pig so your plate vanished when the castle thought you had eaten enough."

It was slowly beginning to dawn on Ron he'd been pranked, though the rest of the hall had reached that conclusion ages ago.

Severus Snape certainly had, and thought this was just more evidence that the Potter boy was his father's son. He had stood there yesterday and said goblins didn't do pranks yet pulled one the very next day. The potions professor was certainly not going to miss this opportunity to point out that he was correct to the rest of the senior staff, and that's where the trouble really started.

You could have heard a pin drop in the great hall as people stopped breathing while they attempted to understand what they'd just heard. All eyes were now glued to the Head of Slytherin, who was currently standing at the staff table with both his hands covering his mouth. It

didn't help though, the deep, raucous laughter escaped between his fingers.

That the sarcastic and sneering form of Severus Snape actually knew how to laugh was a surprise to all, that he was currently standing performing that feat in the great hall was shocking enough to freeze staff and students alike.

As Snape's laughter became more uncontrollable, his eyes held no humour in them whatsoever. Those black orbs were focused on the one person in the entire hall who was nonchalantly eating their breakfast. Harry Crow may have the titles of boy-who-lived, Hogwarts Champion and slayer of trolls but his prank on Snape just elevated him to superstar status amongst his peers.

A/N Thanks for reading.

A/N-2 This is being posted early as I'm heading to Aberdeen for a few days and didn't want to take a chance on having no Wi-Fi.

A/N-3 I was asked by a reader if it was possible to have my stories available in audio format, please check my profile for details.

## Chapter 7

Severus paced up and down the headmaster's office like a caged tiger waiting on feeding time. Since neither he nor Albus were able to directly approach the boy, Filius and Minerva were having to deal with the aftermath of breakfast.

Pomona had also invited herself along to Dumbledore's office, not wanting to miss a moment of this. Things had been far too serious lately and they had all needed a good laugh - especially that perpetual sourpuss Severus.

The other two heads of house had barely made it through the doors when the sourpuss was demanding answers. "Did he admit to being behind it? What was his punishment?"

Filius was enjoying himself and made them wait until both he and Minerva were seated comfortably before answering. "Mr Crow did indeed have a hand in what happened this morning..."

"See, I told you! Just like his father, but no one here wants to hear a word against him. What was his punishment? I know Albus won't let the precious little brat be expelled."

Minerva didn't know if it was wrong to enjoy this so much, and didn't really care. "Mr Crow pointed out, and we all have to agree with him, that both the headmaster and a head of house told the lad that this was normal Hogwarts student behaviour. The entire hall heard you both say that to Mr Crow at breakfast yesterday."

Severus was incensed at this, more so because he couldn't refute that it was true. "I never told him it was normal to feed potions to a professor."

Filius couldn't contain his smile as he answered the angry potions master. "You never said it wasn't."

Pomona as usual attempted to be the voice of reason. "Both pranks that we saw this morning were rather harmless. The youngest Weasley was merely stopped from eating to excess, and there are far worse things he could have done to a professor than making them laugh out loud."

Albus knew he had to intervene here or words would be said that could not be retracted. "I agree with Pomona, the pranks were not only well thought out but relatively harmless. They could easily have taken a more vindictive path. Severus, would you rather have been wearing donkey ears and braying?"

Minerva had more information for them though, and could hardly wait to pass it on. "There weren't just two people pranked inside Hogwarts today, Harry and his friends have taken on the Weasley twins."

This silenced everyone, Fred and George Weasley had earned their reputation as the best - or worst, depending on your point of view - pranksters in Hogwarts. Their head of house didn't keep the senior staff waiting any longer. "The Gryffindor guardian was quite put-out that she's the only portrait in the castle currently allowing the twins entry. The rest not only deny them access, they and the Hogwarts ghosts report any wrongdoing to the staff. Both Fred and George already have detention with Argus tonight."

Albus was flabbergasted at that news. "The castle is giving Harry that much control over what it does?"

It was a smiling Head of Hufflepuff who answered the headmaster. "I told you Albus, the castle chose Harry as her champion. To work against him could see you ejected from Hogwarts."

Severus so wanted to rant and rave some more but was forced to concede the point. With that amount of backing, the brat could have really humiliated him this morning. He still had the occasional nightmare about dangling upside down by his ankle while everyone laughed at his underwear. The very thought of what the brat's father and his friends would have done with such power sent a shiver of dread up and down his spine. Severus recognised a warning being delivered when he saw one, perhaps it was time to back-off this boy. He couldn't help but think perhaps Filius was right, you should never mess with a goblin.

-oOoOo-

By dinner time, Ron was trying a different approach. Sitting at the Hufflepuff table at lunchtime had made no difference, second helpings were still denied him. His new master plan should solve

that problem, sitting once more at his own table it was time to put that plan into action. Ron began grabbing food as normal but not putting it on his plate. Instead the roast potatoes found their way into his pocket. Slices of roast beef soon followed, though he did give the gravy a miss.

No one was laughing at this. The mere thought of having to eat food that came out of Ron Weasley's pocket was spoiling many an appetite. When the food on the table began to once more start disappearing, it was a disconsolate young Gryffindor who sat there almost in tears, munching on the food he'd managed to fill his pockets with.

-oOoOo-

The twins sought out Harry and co. directly after dinner. "Ok guys, we know when we're outmatched."

"What will it take to return things to normal?"

Harry was pleased to see that at least some of this family had sense. "Two things guys, the first being a public apology to Neville for the prank."

This confused the twins so George asked for some clarification. "Just Neville? What about the rest of you guys?"

Hermione had an answer for them. "Well, technically you didn't prank us. We all knew what would happen if we ate the food."

Both twins were happy to comply with that condition and were now waiting on the hammer to fall with condition number two. Padma didn't keep them waiting but the blow was unexpectedly light.

"The second condition is that we four are excluded from your pranks for the rest of your time at Hogwarts."

Fred and George had a quick confab before replying. "If we can have a proviso in there about pranks that affect the entire school, then we have a deal."

"It would be too difficult to leave you four out, but we're more than happy never to target you lot again."

They could hear the admiration in Fred's voice as he complimented the group. "Your prank on Snape was beyond brilliant. No one in their right mind would want to mess with the mini-marauders."

As they shook hands on it, Hermione had a question. "Why did you call us the mini-marauders? I've never heard that name before."

"The marauders were a group of four friends that were the greatest pranksters Hogwarts has ever seen. With you being four firsties trying to pull pranks, I thought it was funny."

"Yeah George, shows what we know - they out-pranked us!"

Neville's parents had both attended Hogwarts, it was more in hope than any expectation that he asked the next question. "Do you know who the marauders were?"

"Sorry Neville, all we know of messrs padfoot prongs moony and wormtail is their wonderful pranking legacy."

"We've not been able to find out anything else about them."

"Well, that ends my interest in the mini-marauders. The last thing I need is another name."

Padma was finding she loved teasing her friends, and couldn't resist this opportunity. "I don't know Harry, the thought of a nickname is quite appealing."

Hermione seamlessly joined right in. "Yes, we could call you something like budgie!"

Padma immediately caught where Hermione was coming from and played right along. "Oh, that would work. He's so colourful and chirpy, Harry really couldn't be called anything else."

"You could even claim it's your goblin sense of humour." Hermione then emulated Padma in giggling at Harry's pretend pout.

Neville was enjoying the teasing amongst his friends but let out a sigh at his perceived fate. "If we're going with a bird theme, I suppose that means I'm a tit then?"

Padma was first to spring to his defence. "Oh no Neville, I see you more as a Robin. Proudly displaying your Gryffindor red and ready to defend your territory."

Neville was blushing at that but had a suggestion of his own to make. "Well, I think Padma should be called Dove. We have them at the manor and they have such a sweet and gentle nature."

Hermione was smiling at her two now blushing friends, she had a question of her own though. "That sounds great but what about me?"

Harry, Padma and Neville all spoke as one - 'Owl!'

It was left to Harry to offer up an explanation. "Owls are birds associated with wisdom, certainly fitting for you. In goblin mythology, the owl is revered as the goddess of all birds. You really couldn't be anything else."

Hermione's blushes now clearly outshone her friends as the twins had a good laugh at their expense. "Okay, scrap the mini-marauders. Messrs budgie, owl, robin and dove shall henceforth be known as the order of the aves!"

That had everyone chuckling before Fred got serious. "Guys, what has Ron got to do to lift the prank. It's getting embarrassing watching him."

Harry suddenly wasn't so forgiving. "He deliberately fired that disgusting curse at Hermione, that's going to take at least an apology."

Both twins were nodding in agreement with that condition, thinking it more than fair.

Harry though wasn't finished. "My friend Padma is a beautiful young witch. Our entire year group watched as slugs popped out her mouth and ran down her chin. I think nothing less than a public apology is going to do for that."

Again Fred and George thought this was a fitting and fair resolution to the problem, they also knew that their younger brother would



never carry it out. Ron could probably be persuaded that mumbling sorry to Hermione in private was the right thing to do, but there was no chance of him doing the whole public thing. "Harry, I'm so glad you don't do pranks."

"Yeah, you would put me 'n Fred out of business!"

"As I said guys, goblins don't do pranks. That doesn't mean I won't help Owl, Robin and Dove with any little projects they might have."

Both twins groaned before George replied. "Harry, only you could class pranking Snape as 'a little project!' "

-oOoOo-

Monday morning brought the now usual spectacle of Ron Weasley playing 'searching for seconds'. He'd arrived this morning armed with a four foot pole with a hook-like appendage fashioned onto the end of it, only to discover that once more Hogwarts was smarter than he was. Yet again the food began disappearing from his extended reach when the magical castle thought he'd eaten enough.

Fred and George at least managed to deflect some of the attention away from their younger brother by making a very public apology to Neville. That they performed this task in their own inimitable style was a given. Both were on their knees in front of the younger Gryffindor, seamlessly switching between bowing and apologising.

"Forgive us oh great prankster..."

"We knew nothing of your prowess when committing our diabolical deed..."

"Had we but known we were in the presence of pranking royalty..."

"We would never knowingly prank a member of the order of aves..."

"Forgive us o' mighty one..."

The twins had timed it to perfection, these were the last legible words to leave either of their mouths before they began braying and grew donkey ears. It took Neville three attempts to accept their

apology because he was laughing so hard, this was greeted with a round of applause before everyone returned to their breakfast.

The hall was in a buoyant mood for a Monday morning, the arrival of the Daily Prophet changed that. The story had finally broken!

### Boy-Who-Lives Rejects Wizarding Heritage

If ever a front page newspaper headline was designed to cause outrage amongst its readers, Harry thought this was it. The article then went on to proclaim its horror - on behalf of their readers of course - that the saviour of their world no longer even called himself Harry Potter. Their young hero now answered to the name of Crow. The newspaper then explained how this travesty had occurred - the boy-who-lived had been raised since that fateful Halloween inside Gringotts by the goblins!

The Prophet had no answers to offer its readers as to how these unprecedented circumstances had evolved, just question after question they were demanding answers to.

Why had the Ministry of Magic stood back and allowed this abnormality to happen to their favoured son?

Albus Dumbledore had claimed for ten years that Harry Potter was safe and well, did he know the child was living with the goblins - and what part did he play in that despicable decision?

The story then descended into hearsay about Harry's first week inside Hogwarts, a few facts stitched together to push whatever agenda the paper wanted. They correctly identified that Harry had been sorted into Ravenclaw though glossed over the whole Hogwarts champion thing. Their preference was clearly to concentrate on how he had 'apparently' deliberately spurned advances from children of prominent wizarding families. The troll incident was certainly covered, though again only the fact that Harry killed it with a goblin blade was considered worth the mentioning.

The paper certainly generated the reaction they wanted from Harry's best friend, but Hermione's outrage wasn't focused where the Prophet would expect. "This is utter rubbish! Can they get away with printing this?"

Padma was also shaking her head. "Oh, you obviously haven't read the best bit yet Hermione? The paragraph near the end where it calls on all the young witches of Hogwarts to show Harry the 'benefits' of rejoining wizarding society. As an extra incentive, it points out that the lucky young witch who lands the famous wizard would one day be incredibly wealthy - and Lady Potter!"

Hermione could hardly breathe as she turned to Harry for some sort of confirmation, the young witch wasn't sure just what she wanted him to say.

Harry could only go with the truth. "The head of the Potter family will become Lord Potter, and be wealthy enough to make the Malfoys appear paupers. Not that they would ever flaunt their wealth - things like that are only done by people trying to impress."

Hermione sat there with her mouth open. The best friend, who she'd been crushing on since laying eyes on him, was some multi-millionaire lord, and one that every girl in the school would now be chasing after.

Harry could see what was happening and decided to put a stop to it at once, he stood and offered Hermione his hand. "My Lady?"

Hermione's eyes nearly popped out of her head at the double meaning now contained in those words. She took his hand to stand and was soon in her usual position, on Harry's arm.

"You said yourself Hermione, the whole thing is utter rubbish. I'm still Harry, and still your best friend."

Hermione held onto his arm with both hands and rested her head on Harry's shoulder in relief as they made their way out the hall. Hermione was so overcome with relief, she didn't care that every pair of female eyes were now on them - far less what kind of statement they were making. She was on Harry's arm and the world was once more fantastic in Hermione Granger's opinion.

Padma and Neville soon joined them, as did the rest of the first years who were all heading for the greenhouses.

Draco was also smiling, though for a far different reason. His father had cautioned him to sit back and observe, sending home any

information he discovered. The head of the Malfoy family had decided he would wait until the story publicly broke before making his move, figuring that he would have more opportunities of manipulating things the way he wanted then. After seeing today's Prophet, Draco knew his father would shortly be bound for Hogwarts.

Albus was also expecting visitors after reading how the Prophet chose to break the news. Cornelius would soon be making his way to the castle and the headmaster didn't really know how he was going to deal with the problem. Nothing in all his years had prepared him for a situation like the one he now found himself in. Albus was going to have to play the entire thing on the fly - he couldn't remember when he'd last had to do that either.

Ron Weasley was the only first year not heading to herbology, rather the Gryffindor set off toward the owlery. Ron thought his meal time problems were far more important than any class about stupid plants. His twin brothers had told Ron what was expected of him to end this torture. He knew within himself that was never going to happen so it was time to call for reinforcements. Ron decided this time there would be no messing about, he was going straight to the top. It was time his mother found out just how much torture her youngest son was being forced to endure inside Hogwarts.

-oOoOo-

Professor Sprout soon had them all working so there was no time for any comments about today's Prophet, Harry was quite happy with that. After the lesson, he overheard the other three Ravenclaw first year boys discussing what they thought was going to happen after lunch, it was now common knowledge that Professor Quirrell had 'left' Hogwarts.

Harry thought this might be good opportunity to start working on those 'snubbing' rumours. "Guys, my father is arranging a private defence tutor for me. If you want, I can ask them if it's okay to up the numbers a bit?"

Michael, Anthony and Terry were all keen but Malfoy had overheard. It was with a superior sneer he addressed Harry, loud enough though to ensure everyone else heard. "If you think any 'proper' pureblood witch or wizard would ever stand for a goblin teaching them, you really are as big an idiot as Weasley claims Crow."

Padma was quick to jump all over Malfoy at his implied insult. "My family were recognised as pureblood witches and wizards while your ancestors were still herding goats in the French mountains. We apparently have different opinions about what constitutes a proper pureblood. Daddy having plenty of money doesn't change the fact it was only a few generations ago that the British branch of the Malfoys were chased out of France with their tails between their legs."

Draco was livid and moved threateningly toward Padma, only to find his way blocked by both Neville and Harry. This was Hogwats first glimpse of Neville standing up for himself and it took everyone, including Malfoy, by surprise.

"Like Padma says, we have a different definition of what a proper pureblood is. While your ancestors were herding those goats, The Longbottoms and Potters were already magical lords in this country. By any definition you care to make, my blood is classed as purer than yours."

Padma was standing beside Hermione and couldn't help but whisper to her, "Told you Robin was a good name for Neville."

Neville though wasn't quite finished yet. "If the defence teacher Harry's father provides is half as good as Master Pitslay, then I'll be first in line for that class too. Goblin or not, it's whether they can teach that counts - and even a house elf would have to be better at teaching defence than Quirrell."

Neville had effectively cut the legs from under Malfoy and the blond Slytherin was let to storm away as the Ravenclaws, Gryfindors, - minus a missing Ron Weasley - and the Hufflepuffs all quickly confirmed to Harry they would be delighted if he could arrange for them to join his defence lessons.

Malfoy's posse, and the rest of the snakes, accompanied him as he stormed off. The other Slytherins had been deliberately non-committal though, preferring to take the Slytherin approach and see who could be teaching them first. Tracy, Daphne and Millicent had barely poked their collective heads into the great hall when they were doing an about-turn and heading back to ask Harry if they could join the lessons too.

Harry was pleasantly surprised and said he intended to include them when he asked the new tutor. When the group of friends reached the great hall, the mystery of the girls' sudden change of heart was there for all to see. The wizard standing beside McGonagall was clearly on good terms with the professor as they stood and chatted, while every witch in the castle suddenly wished they were in the Deputy Headmistress' shoes and talking to the handsome wizard.

He was rugged, tanned and appeared to be in his early twenties. With dark red hair that was shoulder length and held in a ponytail, the wizard was at least six feet tall and his dragon hide jacket really emphasised those broad shoulders. As McGonagall led him over toward Harry, they caught a glimpse of a dragon tooth earring too. Hermione suddenly had a warm and fuzzy feeling deep in her bones. Apart from the colour of his hair, this was probably a close approximation of what Harry would mature into at the same age. This had the young witch smiling to herself and holding her best friend's arm even tighter.

"Mr Crow, I would like to introduce you to the last Gryffindor who held the position of Hogwarts Head Boy - William Weasley."

"Hi Harry, hope you don't mind if I call you that? I'm a curse-breaker for Gringotts and Ragnok himself pulled me back from Egypt to tutor you in defence. Once he made me aware of the actual situation here, well I couldn't really refuse." What Bill wasn't saying was he'd fought this assignment tooth and nail, until told the prophecy. Any complaints about teaching some snot-nosed kid went right out the window after that. His entire argument that raiding tombs was a better use of his hard-won skills just didn't hold water when compared to training the boy prophesied to fight Voldemort.

Harry though got the message that this person had been trusted with the prophecy. "Pleased to meet you sir, Harry's fine and thanks for doing this. I don't know what Hogwarts has arranged as cover for Professor Quirrell but I said to my classmates I would ask if they could join the class too?"

Bill's smile had most of the witches in the great hall swooning. "Harry, for what I'm being paid for this, you call the shots. If you want me to take all the first years, that's fine with me."

Harry was just about to ask Professor McGonagall if this would be okay when they were rudely interrupted by the youngest Weasley currently attending Hogwarts rushing into the great hall.

"BILL! This is fantastic, I just wrote to mum this morning and now you're here. I don't know what the curse on me is but I'm sure you'll break it - I'm starving to death in Hogwarts."

The elder Weasley was embarrassed at this loud and rude interruption during what was effectively his work. "Sorry Ron, I've no idea what you're talking about. I'm at Hogwarts to teach Harry here defence."

Ron's expression of betrayal was soon replaced by one of utter rage. "That's just not fair, He gets everything. Not this time Crow, eat slugs!"

His actions had been so unexpected that there was no time for anyone to react, and Harry so close that Ron knew he couldn't miss this time. Unfortunately, his spellotaped wand had other ideas. The spell backfired from his damaged wand, blowing Ron onto his arse.

McGonagall was outraged, and didn't care who knew it. "Mr Weasley, never in all my years at Hogwarts have I encountered someone as single-mindedly stupid as you. It would seem you didn't learn your lesson the last time you used that curse so something different will have to be tried..."

The first slug escaping Ron's mouth halted his head of house's tirade, for the moment. "Percy, take your brother to the infirmary. Inform Madam Pomfery that under no condition is he to leave there before I have another word with him."

As Ron was led away, McGonagall had a moment to get her temper back under control. Gryffindors attacking anyone unprovoked was always going to get her ire up. Doing it twice, with the second time being right in front of her, was going to see Minerva heading for the Burrow later. First though, she had a situation to deal with.

"Mr Crow, I really appreciate your suggestion about allowing the rest of first year to attend. It has my blessing since the alternative at the moment is a study period in the library. I can also assure you that the youngest Weasley brother will learn to keep his wand in his

pocket - or he will not be in Hogwarts much longer. William, can I suggest you have lunch with the twins and discover what's really going on here?"

The twins sheepishly approached their eldest brother and head of house, having never seen McGonagall so angry before - not even at them. "Sorry Harry, Ron's always had a wicked temper. We'll bring Bill up to speed on what the problem is here."

Neville headed off with them to the Gryffindor table while the Ravenclaw trio sat at their normal spots. It was a smirking Rodger who once more dispelled any lingering awkwardness. "I'll say this for you Harry, things are never dull when you're around."

There was real sincerity in Harry's voice as he answered. "Roger, you have no idea how much I'm wishing for a couple of dull months. You know the kind of thing, no one firing curses at you, no trolls needing slain and my name not plastered all over the papers. Is that really too much to ask?"

The older Ravenclaw was now laughing at that. "For you Harry, probably."

Cho was still getting teased by her friends over her first attempt to talk to Harry. There was something she really needed to know though so risked it again. "Harry, do you think your tutor will be teaching any of the other year groups?"

Harry thought for a moment before replying. "I doubt it Cho, Gringotts curse-breakers are some of the most highly trained and specialised workers they have. The bank will certainly have tasks for him the rest of the week. For Mr Weasley to even gain entry to that program makes him pretty special, I can't believe my father managed to get a curse-breaker as a defence tutor."

Cho couldn't hide her disappointment. "I can't believe he's a Weasley, none of the rest of them look like that."

One of the seventh year girls soon put Cho straight. "His younger brother Charlie was Gryffindor Quidditch Captain. A brilliant seeker and the hottest thing I've ever seen sitting on a broom." Her flushed cheeks left no one in any doubt exactly what she meant by hot.



With a comedic sense of timing that had half the Ravenclaw table doing spit-takes, Padma couldn't resist commenting. "I wonder if Ronald was dropped on his head as a baby?"

As everyone was laughing, Hermione had a thought. "I wonder if the prat will be so quick to use that foul curse again after experiencing it first hand?"

Padma agreed but also thought this was a golden opportunity to tease her friend some more. "I couldn't help noticing you looked pretty pleased to see our new defence tutor too?"

"Oh absolutely Padma. Did you see the way the rest of the witches in here reacted? If they're all drooling over Professor Weasley, perhaps they'll leave Harry alone."

Hermione's answer may have somewhat shocked Padma but it brought the first genuine smile to Harry's face since the Prophet had been delivered this morning.

-oOoOo-

The same issue of the wizarding newspaper was lying on Ragnok's desk, both goblins present having already read it.

"Well Barchoke, the game is now afoot. We will soon discover if your son is as profitable an option as we hoped."

"I have every confidence in him director, he will do us proud."

"He'll need to, otherwise Gringotts could soon find itself embroiled in a war."

"With respect Director, we both know without my son's intervention that outcome is inevitable. Should the dark one return, the ministry would soon fall to him. His gaze would then turn in our direction, and our kin have fought wars rather than bow to better wizards than that self-proclaimed lord, Voldemort. A war against we goblins would be used to cement his hold on the magical community, they wouldn't dare oppose him with a 'goblin rebellion' then in progress."

"I am well aware of this Barchoke, it was my main reason for accepting your plan for the prophesied child. Unlike you, I can't

afford to show any sentiment on Crow's behalf. Despite his tender age, he is a goblin warrior on a mission and we have to remember that. Goblins are barred by treaty from directly interfering in the affairs of wizards. If the ministry should take the view that we have broken that treaty, then there could be a war."

Barchoke attempted to sound more confident than he was. "That outcome would require the ministry acknowledging Harry Potter is now a goblin, something they will never do."

"They are far more likely to attempt to wrestle control of your son away from you, are you certain that all the loopholes in that scenario are covered?"

"Yes director. If things start proceeding in that direction, Harry has the power to close that avenue of attack off permanently. That will be an unfortunate occurrence but not the disaster the ministry gaining control of him would be. We've effectively shut Dumbledore out but then the old wizard's actions were easy to predict."

"That is exactly my point Barchoke. It's very difficult to predict what that idiot Fudge will do because it depends on who has the minister's ear at the time."

This was what had the father so worried. "We hope to take away the minister's biggest influence next, and release the fox amongst the chickens to add more confusion. It sounded good when we planned it, sitting here while everything is out-with my control is not easy."

Ragnok could see the apprehension in the senior accounts manager, torment about the child he had raised as his own. "You can be proud of your son Barchoke, we both know he will do his best. Curse-breaker Wesley's presence is also a welcome boost. There is genuine animosity there between the Weasleys and one of the main antagonists. He should be another asset on site for us."

Barchoke knew all this and agreed with everything the director said, he also knew that both of them were left hoping that Harry's best was good enough. He was after all only eleven.

-oOoOo-

Albus was finding it hard to believe that an eleven year old wizard was causing him so much trouble. He currently had the Minister of Magic, the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and Lucius Malfoy, a member of the Hogwarts board of governors, asking questions that he really had no answers for. Well, no answers that they wanted to hear.

The minister demanded to know when Hogwarts began accepting goblins as students.

"I was denying the boy access to Hogwarts as Harry Crow but the castle over-ruled me, making him a Hogwarts champion before passing over the sword of Gryffindor."

Cornelius was not impressed with that answer. "I find it hard to believe that a stone building could possibly do something like that..."

The sorting hat was on its usual shelf in the Hogwarts Headmaster's office. It wouldn't normally speak between sorting ceremonies but was quick to spring to the defence of the Hogwarts Champion. "...and I find it hard to believe the boy who used to wet himself every time one of his professors asked him a question ended up Minister of Magic. Tell me young Cornelius, have you recovered from your little problem?"

The hat's intervention brought every one up sharply, though Amelia Bones had a few follow-up questions for Dumbledore. "Would the Sword of Gryffindor be the goblin blade in question that brought down a troll? While we're on the subject, where did this incident take place?" Her niece Susan had written home with some fanciful story that Amelia had dismissed as the infamous Hogwarts rumour mill working overtime.

Cornelius was not renowned as a patient wizard and had recovered from the hat's jibe. His patience was especially stretched due to being bombarded with owls demanding answers, answers the Minister of Magic fully intended to get here today. "Enough of this Dumbledore, I'm a busy man. Let's get the lad up here and see what he's got to say for himself."

Albus was loath to admit he couldn't do something, particularly inside Hogwarts. He didn't have any other options though but to speak the truth. "I'm sorry Cornelius, I can't do that. For Harry to be

in this office, his father must be present too. This is goblin law and there's nothing we can do about it."

"So, the rumours are true. Albus Dumbledore is barred from Gringotts and persona non grata amongst the goblins?" Lucius couldn't quite hide his delight at the humbling of the headmaster.

The minister though hadn't traveled to Hogwarts only to be denied by a technicality. "Can I assume that you can be in a classroom with the boy, with present company of course?"

Again Albus didn't have any other answers or alternatives so they all ended trooping off down to the defence classroom.

A/N thanks for reading

## Chapter 8

Bill had been shocked at the twins' tale of Ron's behaviour, Percy's nonintervention was also a source of puzzlement for the eldest Weasley son. Even taking away the fact that Ron was Percy's younger brother, he was still a Gryffindor prefect. A prefect with specific duties to watch over the first years.

That Fred and George had even begun the process of becoming friends with Harry made Ron's actions all the harder to explain, never mind defend. Bill also thought that a public apology to the young girl Ron hit with that curse was not only a fair thing to ask, it was the least he could do. He actually thought an apology should have been offered immediately, without Ron needing to be forced into it.

One thing his youngest brother did mention that generated a specific cause for Bill's concern was his letter home to their mother. Knowing her as he did, Bill would not be surprised if this resulted in a howler heading in Harry Crow's direction. He would need to visit the Burrow after class to head off the disaster that could quickly descend into. Their mother in a temper wasn't known as someone who would choose their words carefully, rather just loudly yelling the first thing that entered her head.

Bill was having to choose his words carefully in front of the class too, as it would appear he'd just made an error.

"Curse-breaker Weasley, I think you misinterpreted my answer sir. I know there are curses which no magical shields can block, I was referring to a goblin shield when I answered your question."

"I'm sorry Mr Crow but those are spells I'm not familiar with, perhaps you could show us?"

A smiling Harry stood and removed a metallic disc from his pocket, it easily fitted into the palm of his hand - until that was he twisted the disk a certain way. Seconds later, Harry had slipped a gleaming metallic shield onto his left forearm. It was oval in shape and went from slightly beyond his fingertips to just past his elbow, being about eighteen inches across at its widest point. A self-adjusting strap on his forearm and a grip for his left hand saw it securely anchored without in any way restricting his movement. The rest of the class

were suitably impressed, here was a practical defence method they didn't need to know any spells to use.

Draco was already in a foul mood after having to eat his words and attend the defence class, Potter once more in the limelight was not something he was prepared to tolerate. "Do you honestly expect us to believe you can stop curses with that bit of tin? It looks like something our house elf would serve sandwiches off."

Harry ignored the sniggering being aimed in his direction. "This shield is not designed to actually stop curses, rather deflect them away from you. That takes a lot less power and really lengthens the life of the shield. A powerful dark curse would probably shatter it, but the same curse would pass right through a magical shield. This also free's up your other arm, allowing you to fight back at the same time."

The wannabe leader of the first years was dismissive of all this, and made no attempt to hide his disbelief. "Prove it!"

Harry raised his eyebrow questioningly at their teacher and got a nod of acceptance in return. "Stinging hexes ok Mr Crow?"

After agreeing, Harry made his way to the front of the class. He withdrew his knife and took up a defensive stance, awaiting the first hex.

Bill deliberately aimed his hex at Harry's chest, just above where the lad had positioned his shield. The boy though was incredibly fast, moving and deflecting the curse away from him. The high-pitched yell alerted the teacher that the stinging hex had actually hit someone else in the class. Draco now wore a rather pained expression and was currently rubbing his shoulder.

Harry glared at him. "Was that enough proof Malfoy or do we need to go again?"

Draco knew he couldn't back down, this had now become a challenge. "Nothing but a fluke, he aimed right at the shield... agh!"

Bill had fired three hexes at Harry in quick succession, all at different body parts. Harry had deflected the first one at Malfoy again, dodged the second but the third one connected with his thigh. Harry

though didn't cry out, merely bowed in acknowledgement to his teacher's skill.

"I think Mr Crow ably demonstrated the effectiveness of a physical shield, and some of its restrictions." Bill was sure the lad could have dealt with all three hexes he'd fired, Harry though appeared willing to take a hit to ensure the first one was deflected back at the Malfoy boy. He decided not to mention this, instead used the hit as a teaching point. "A good magical shield would easily have protected Mr Crow from all three curses. Using a combination of both shielding methods should see him better protected in the future."

Bill was also thinking the lad would need more extensive lessons in defence than taking the timetabled class with the rest of his year-mates on a Monday and Thursday could provide. He'd obviously had some previous training and Bill would be making enquires about all of this on his return to Gringotts.

Hogwarts newest professor was just getting the class back on track about the best methods of defending yourself when their visitors arrived.

Albus thought that this would at least be better than having the lad put on the spot in the great hall, he well remembered how his own attempt at that had gone.

"Excuse us Professor Weasley, sorry to disrupt your first class but we require a few words with Mr Crow."

Cornelius spotted the black-haired bespectacled boy sitting at the front of the class and waded right in. He was after all the Minister of Magic and used to getting his own way. "Harry my boy, you have no idea how distressed I was to discover just how you'd been raised. I'm here today to put a stop to this goblin nonsense, and also see you being cared for by a proper wizarding family. I'm sure we can soon clear up this momentous misunderstanding..."

The giggling had turned to full blown laughter at his last comment, causing a puzzled look to replace the minister's confident expression.

"Em...sir, my name's Michael - not Harry."

This saw the volume of laughter increase, as did the minister's confusion. "Well, if you're not Harry, who is?"

Harry stood to face this fool in the green bowler hat. "My name is Harry, though probably not the Harry you're looking for. You see, I have no need of a new family and am certainly not your boy."

Lucius was always amazed that, no matter how stupid he thought Fudge was, the man still retained the ability to prove he was even stupider than Lucius believed. Appearances though had to be maintained. "Do not speak to the Minister of Magic in that tone boy, show some respect for your betters."

"My 'betters' would know it is extremely ill-mannered to address someone without introducing yourself first, something I noticed you didn't bother with either. I would also like to point out that divination isn't an optional subject until third year, how was I supposed to know this was the Minister of Magic? If that ridiculous green hat is some sort of badge of office then you really need to rethink that image. A sword is way cooler. I am Harry Crow, son of Barchoke, Gringotts Senior Accounts Manager."

Hermione was of course sitting in her usual seat, right beside Harry. In the defence classroom, this placed her between Harry and the door. Hermione was left sitting just in front of where Harry was now standing and the young witch was already twirling her hair due to her mounting anxiety. Her best friend had basically just told-off the magical equivalent of the country's Prime Minister. Both wizards who'd entered with the headmaster appeared flabbergasted, though the lady's eyes were practically twinkling with amusement.

"Mr Crow, my name is Amelia Bones and I'm head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

Harry bowed to the woman and answered her respectfully. "Well met Madam Bones, I sincerely hope you'r not here to arrest me?"

Amelia actually broke into a smile at this. "Not at the moment Mr Crow. This is Minister Fudge and the other wizard is Lucius Malfoy..."

There was an instant change in Harry at this news, he immediately addressed Draco's father. "My apologies sir. At my goblin school, we



were taught classes on Lucius Malfoy. Again though, only your deeds were examined in great detail which is why I didn't recognise you."

Hermione thought she had seen all of Harry's faces but here was one the young witch didn't recognise. Harry was practically fawning over Lucius Malfoy, something that went against everything she knew about her best friend. The only explanation that made any sense to Hermione was if Harry was up to something. As the senior Malfoy was lapping up Harry's praise like Pooh Bear slurps honey, she didn't think it would take too long to discover if there was a sting in the tail.

"You attended classes about me?"

"Certainly sir, you are required reading for nine year old goblins in their economics classes."

Dumbledore didn't know Harry near as well as Hermione did but even he suspected the lad was up to something. Decades of dealing with students playing pranks had given the headmaster almost a sixth sense about these things. Albus decided he wanted to know more and, at this particular time, anything that diverted attention away from him was a good thing in his book. "What did these lessons consist of Mr Crow?"

"Oh it's a well-known fact that the Malfoy family donates generously to lots of charities and good causes. It's also well-known that those donations generally go to organisations where either Mr Malfoy or his wife are in some way connected with the charity or cause, which is why they are on so many committees and boards."

This was not something Lucius tended to broadcast but wasn't too bothered about those facts being revealed here. The boy was certainly correct, those in the know recognised the benefits of having a Malfoy on their decision making panel.

Harry though wasn't finished. In fact, he was just getting started. "This is where the real genius of this economic scheme begins. You see, either Mr Malfoy or his wife then insist their charitable donation is handled by a specific consultancy firm, Scorpius Enterprises. A responsible thing to do you might say, until you discover just who owns and runs Scorpius Enterprises - Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy."

Lucius' voice had dropped to a dangerous whisper now. "How did you know that boy?"

Harry though was unperturbed. Hermione now recognised this face, it was a face that told Hermione her best friend considered Lucius Malfoy an enemy. It was also a face she hoped was never directed at her.

"Now scooping a good portion of that charitable donation back into your own vault could be forgiven, if that was all the Malfoys were up to. Fraudulently refilling their vaults is not even the tip of the iceberg. They also 'recommend' the people to carry-out whatever work gets done or to provide materials needed with what's left of their donation. That these recommendations just happen to be the Malfoy's 'friends' would suggest to me there are switch-backs involved too. A switch-back is when money is paid illegally to win a contract to do work. This usually sees a contract awarded to a firm who are never the most economical option, and rarely the best at what they do."

Lucius Malfoy was now clearly livid but it was Amelia who asked Harry the question he was expecting. "Mr Crow, isn't that privileged information the goblins are handing out?"

Harry was quick to answer. "Oh no Madam Bones, all this information is already available inside the ministry. It just involves different departments, and there is a real lack of communication between them. I really have no idea whether Mr Malfoy uses his influence to ensure that lack of communication continues but that is neither here nor there. You see, we were all laughing at how easily Mr Malfoy could publicly make a large donation to charity, and then privately ensure a large proportion of it ended back in his own vault when our tutor pointed out what was really going on..."

"I think we've heard quite enough of this fantasy..." Lucius' growl intimidated no one. Even in full death eater regalia, he wouldn't have been able to intimidate Harry into stopping speaking. That both Amelia and Dumbledore clearly wanted to hear more certainly didn't harm Harry's case.

Hermione recognised this Harry as the one that took down the troll, he appeared calm on the surface but she was aware just how quickly he could spring into action. That he was subtly moving so

she was no longer directly between him and Malfoy was another clue. She had her wand in her pocket but, for all the training she had, that's where it was going to have to stay. If a fight started, she was grabbing Padma and dragging both of them under the desk.

Harry continued as if Lucius hadn't spoken. "You see, every single contract of work Scorpius Enterprises awards goes only to those organisations that are owned and run by former death eaters. Mr Malfoy is secretly funding the death eater movement in readiness for his master's return."

The minister exploded at this. "These allegations are preposterous boy! Lucius Malfoy is an upstanding member of the British magical community and you-know-who is dead..."

Harry cut right across the minister, and almost started a riot in the class. Just speaking the name out loud got a reaction, that was until people began to understand what Harry was actually saying. "Voldemort is not dead and was here inside Hogwarts last week. The senior staff fought him in the corridor the Headmaster had warned us all not to go near, at least you were right about the most painful death bit awaiting anyone who went there headmaster. Why do you think Quirrell isn't teaching this class? He was possessed by Voldemort and let that troll into the castle as a diversion, Professor Quirrell died when the Headmaster cast Voldemort out of the castle."

Hermione was watching the adult's reactions to these revelations since Harry's eyes never left Lucius Malfoy. At the mention of Voldemort, Lucius was quite green about the gills. The Minister of Magic actually looked like someone who'd just wet themselves while Madam Bones appeared extremely angry, thankfully not at Harry. It was Dumbledore's reaction that drew her attention though, he was focused on Harry as if attempting to see right through her best friend. It was also clear to Hermione that the headmaster wasn't seeing what he wanted.

"Harry, how could you possibly know all that?"

"Hogwarts chose me as her champion Headmaster, that means she keeps me informed of things the castle thinks I need to know."

The Grey Lady passed through the wall to float at Harry's side. "Our champion speaks the truth. My mother helped build Hogwarts to

teach all of this country's magical children, not as a plaything for the current headmaster. I give you notice Albus Dumbledore, the castle will no longer support you dragging her children into danger. But for our champion's swift action, three of our youngest would be no more. This is your final warning."

"ALBUS DUMBLEDORE! Why am I finding out Voldemort is back from an eleven year old boy?"

Hermione quickly changed her opinion. Madam Bones wasn't extremely angry, the witch in question was right royally pissed-off. Hermione was even more grateful that anger wasn't directed in Harry's direction.

Cornelius was finally stung into action. "That's quite enough Amelia, all this talk about you-know-who being back stops now. He's not back, he can't be back."

"You saying that minister doesn't make it true, just like Malfoy here saying he's not a death eater doesn't make it true either."

"I'm warning you for the last time boy..."

Harry moved closer to Malfoy. "I'm sure Professor Snape will have some veritaserum in his department, a few drops would end this argument once and for all. How about a magical oath that you were never willingly a death eater? Personally, rolling up your left sleeve would be enough proof for me..."

Malfoy's control finally snapped and he went for his wand but, since Harry had deliberately provoked the death eater, he expected nothing else. Harry's custom-made knife had its point digging into Lucius' chest, directly in line with his beating heart, before the death eater could even think about getting a curse off. "If you intended to use your wand for a magical oath, go right ahead. Otherwise, try anything and I'm pushing this blade home. We'll all get a chance to see just how pure Malfoy blood is when its pumping out your chest."

There was a short kerfuffle behind which ended with a slap and a yelp Harry was coming to recognise. "It's only Draco trying to interfere. I slapped him one and now Neville's got him covered."

Harry's eyes never left the senior Malfoy but he was sorry he missed Hermione slapping Draco. "Thanks Hermione, nice to know someone has my back."

Amelia's wand had Malfoy covered the instant he reached for his, she was delighted to see the young lad had the drop on the arrogant arse. Like Harry, Amelia was certain Lucius Malfoy was a death eater but was powerless to intervene because of his ministerial contacts. She didn't believe a young boy should have to solve their death eater problem but wouldn't lose any sleep if he skewered Malfoy today.

Cornelius didn't know whether to shit or swear but Albus couldn't stand there and see a young man become a murderer, even to rid the world of Lucius Malfoy. "Mr Crow, I can't allow you to kill him."

"Had he drawn a wand on me inside Gringotts, Malfoy would already be dead headmaster. His blond hair would be streaked with red as his head rolled along the bank's floor."

Lucius was frozen to the spot. Draco had written home that this boy had slaughtered a troll with a blade, one glance into those blazing green eyes told him this boy wouldn't hesitate to carry out his threat. The wicked looking knife currently pressing between his ribs certainly lent credence to his fears, Lucius felt closer to death than at any other time in his life.

Dumbledore also recognised Harry was ready and prepared to carry out his threat. "That may be so, but we're not in Gringotts at the moment."

"Very true sir, so please answer me this. What is the punishment for an adult drawing a wand on a student inside Hogwarts? Considering we have the Minister of Magic, Chief Mugwump and head of the DMLE as witnesses, I don't think even Malfoy here could get away with his 'I was under the imperious curse' lie again."

Albus felt every pair of eyes, except Harry's, on him and hated saying what he had to. "I'm sorry Mr Crow, the best I can do is have him escorted out of Hogwarts."

"Hogwarts shall ensure he never sets foot in the castle again young champion."

"Thank you Helena, do you have any other options for me Madam Bones?"

Amelia also hated having to give her answer but would never shirk her duty. "I'm sorry Mr Crow, technically Malfoy has committed no crime - yet."

"So the ministry has left me with the same option his master came up with, letting his curse bounce off me and kill the piece of shit. Now Minister, perhaps you will understand why I have no intention of 'ending this goblin nonsense'. Tell me sir, was Malfoy here one of these 'proper wizarding families' you were so desperate to have me raised by?"

Cornelius appeared to recover some of his bluster after being addressed by the boy-who-lived. "Put that weapon down at once boy, the only one breaking the law here is you."

Harry then heard a welcome voice behind him. "I've got your back Harry, Malfoy moves a muscle and I'll take his head off!"

This seemed to make up Harry's mind. "Thank you Curse-breaker Weasley. Nice to know there's one adult in this room I can rely on to protect me." Harry's knife flashed as Lucius let out a yell, he was cut from his left shoulder to wrist. The cut wasn't deep, having the sleeve of his robes sliced open was probably more painful to Lucius. "You should get Madam Pomfrey to look at that. She won't be able to do anything about your dark mark though, otherwise Snape would have had his removed years ago."

Even with the blood leaking out the wound Harry had just caused, and Lucius dropping his wand to cover the dark mark with his right hand, couldn't totally disguise that disgusting tattoo. Everyone in the room clearly saw it. As they were mesmerised with Malfoy's left forearm, Harry had sheathed his knife and now had Godric's sword in his hand.

"Goblins value honour and justice above all, no amount of gold can make up for losing either one. The man who's sword this once was epitomised both of those traits, which is why the goblins forged him this magnificent blade. These are values the wizarding community appears to have forgotten."

Harry turned his attention back to Malfoy. "When your master comes back, tell him I'll be waiting to finish the job. This time that coward and all of his followers will be dealt with." Any one else, apart from Albus Dumbledore, saying something like that would either be laughed at - or rushed to a specialised ward in St Mungo's. Harry standing there wielding his magical blade appeared to radiate an inner power, a power everyone in that classroom could see and even feel. Suddenly the castle naming him as her champion made perfect sense.

The Hogwarts Champion then addressed the Minister of Magic. "My father has already confirmed to Dumbledore that the decision on whether my future lies as a goblin or a wizard is mine, and mine alone to make. I'll tell you something for free Minister, from where I'm standing at the moment that's not a hard decision for me to make. The ministry has no legal or moral grounds to remove me from my father, the person who raised an abandoned toddler when every adult in this room failed me. If you attempt to destroy my life, I will respond as any goblin would - by fighting back with everything that I have."

Fudge was about to start shouting when Harry silenced him by the simple act of pointing his sword in the minister's direction. "Tell me this Minister. Should the fabled boy-who-lived leave Hogwarts and return to Gringotts, citing Minister Fudge's interference as my main reason for rejecting wizarding society to live the rest of his life as a goblin, what would be the public's reaction?"

Cornelius Fudge now had a complexion that exactly matched his lime green bowler hat.

"Thanks to this blond bastard and his masked buddies, my father is all the family I have left in the world. He's fought two duels to the death against goblins who believed a wizard had no place in goblin society, please don't doubt for a second I wouldn't do the same for my father. I am my father's son Minister, and proud to be so."

Harry returned his sword to its scabbard while bowing to Bill. "Curse-breaker Weasley, I thank you for your support and please don't think I counted you as one of those adults who failed an orphaned toddler."

Bill returned the bow without taking his eyes or wand off Malfoy. "Harry, I think I was ten at the time so no harm done. Please know though that this time around I'm old enough and would be honoured to stand by your side. Weasleys always stand on the side the light, so you can count on my wand in the fight against Voldemort."

Harry then bowed to Amelia. "Madam, a pleasure meeting you. I know that in any fight against Voldemort, Amelia Bones would be at the heart of that battle. Should you wish to speak again, please arrange it through Professor McGonagall or my head of house. Your honesty and regard for the law are well known within Gringotts, as are the restrictions you are required to work under. I hope what has been learned here today may help with those restrictions."

With that, Harry marched out the classroom.

Harry's parting words were like an explosion of understanding for a few of the adults in the classroom. Albus and Amelia got it at once with Bill only a few moments behind. The goblins were barred by treaty from interfering in wizarding affairs yet were currently sitting on an active volcano, one that was soon due to erupt. They knew Voldemort wasn't dead, and also that his vile organisation was sitting ready for his return, yet couldn't do anything with that information. Harry Crow had just laid it out for them on a silver salver. Leaving behind a bleeding Malfoy, standing there with his dark mark clearly visible, and a minister who was almost catatonic with the thought of his precious public approval rating plunging into minus numbers.

Amelia was so impressed, she wanted to run after that boy and kiss him for this gift. If the young witch who almost bowled her over following Harry out the door was any indicator, he would soon be getting kissed by someone a lot nearer his own age.

-oOoOo-

Hermione had learned her lesson from the troll debacle, she had no intention of letting Harry have time to formulate any wrong ideas about this. She quickly grabbed both of their defence stuff and chucked it into his bag before tearing out of there after him. She thought Dumbledore was going to say something about her leaving too, but then the headmaster seemed to change his mind. He would need to have taken his wand out and restrained the determined



young witch, Harry needed her and this time she intended to be there for him.

Hogwarts had also learned from the troll incident, leaving her champion alone for the entire evening was not a mistake the castle intended to make again. The portraits and the Fat Friar quickly led Hermione straight to him, she didn't even hesitate when seeing it was a boy's toilet. She burst in and heard retching noises coming from one of the cubicles.

Harry was throwing-up into one of the toilets when he suddenly felt someone slowly rubbing his back. "It's okay Harry, I'm here for you."

Those words, combined with Hermione's soothing actions were better than any potion from Madam Pomfrey for settling his nerves and stomach. It still took a couple of minutes for him to be able to answer her though. "Won't you get into trouble for leaving the class, and being in a boy's toilet?"

"I just watched my best friend rip the Minister of Magic a new one so figured, what the hell! You only live once so why not throw a little danger in there. And anyway, the Fat Friar was going to get Moaning Myrtle to stand guard for us. Trust me, no boys will enter this toilet with her there."

"How did I come across back there? I was hoping for someone who was in control and desperately trying to avoid being considered some psychotic nutter."

"I thought you were wonderful but can I ask you something, just how long have you been planning that?"

Harry couldn't help but smile, not surprised that Hermione would see through him and pick up on their scheme. "So much for spontaneity, its over-rated anyway. Father and I actually had about six plans depending on the circumstances. I couldn't believe my luck at how it played out, Curse-breaker Weasley and Madam Bones were unbelievable bonuses. We needed Malfoy's deeds and dark mark made public, he's the lynch pin in the death eater organisation. One of the plans had me slapping Malfoy senior and challenging him to a duel..."

Hermione couldn't hide her horror at that outcome. "Harry, could you beat him in a duel?"

"Hermione, I'm eleven - he would kick my arse. He let me get close today which was a big mistake. With a blade, I could carve my initials on his forehead before he could say ouch! For a wand duel, I had intended to sucker him into accepting and then nominate our head of house to fight for my honour. Master Flitwick was a duelling champion on the European circuit and Dumbledore is probably the only person within a hundred mile radius who could hope to match him."

"So you had no intention of killing him, that was all a bluff?"

Harry looked straight into Hermione's eyes and answered her as honestly as he could. "That was never part of the plan Hermione but if he'd tried anything stupid...thanks for taking care of Draco for me."

Hermione understood what Harry was saying and accepted it, she'd seen the same thing with the troll. He'd done everything he could to avoid killing the creature but when that didn't work, Harry thankfully hadn't hesitated. "As to Draco, I don't know what came over me. I just saw him rushing at your back and reacted, he doesn't respond too well to getting walloped in the face. Neville then sat on him and promised more of the same if he didn't behave."

Bill ignored the ghost's flirting and headed straight into the toilet indicated by the portraits, declaring himself for Harry meant the castle was willing to help Bill aid its champion. The sight that greeted Bill warmed the eldest Weasley's heart. The curse-breaker was slowly getting used to the reaction of adrenalin leaving your system after being in a life-threatening situation, an occupational hazard in his job. The first few times though his actions had mirrored Harry's. He'd never had someone rubbing his back and offering comfort while he threw-up, Gringotts curse-breakers didn't go in for much of that touchy-feely stuff. He conjured a glass and then filled it with water. "Here Harry, drink this."

As Harry was drinking, Hermione asked the question they both wanted the answer to. "Sir, what happened after we left?"

"Oh, Malfoy demanded I lower my wand or he would see me sacked from Hogwarts. When I explained that I worked for Gringotts, and

was only in Hogwarts as a tutor for you since Voldemort killed Quirrell, well you can imagine the uproar that caused. I did advise him to complain to my superiors at the bank, he would probably get me a raise."

This got a giggle from Hermione and even Harry smiled. "Dumbledore then took the minister up to his office for a pick-me-up, I don't think he was talking about a lemon drop. You really kicked Fudge where it hurts, his public approval rating. I also think Dumbledore was desperate to get away from Amelia Bones before she could ask any more questions, she had her sights on someone else though. As soon as the minister left, Lucius was invited to accompany her to the ministry." Bill was smiling at the next bit. "Apparently some new evidence has just been revealed that casts doubt on his claims not to be a death eater. She did promise to return, I got the impression she wanted to speak with you and then rip Dumbledore's head off."

This had both Harry and Hermione smiling too but Bill had more to say. "Harry, what you did in there today was brave, bold and bloody brilliant. I left Hogwarts and went straight to work for Gringotts so I have more than a fair idea of what really went on in that classroom, I take it from Miss Granger's expression that she is aware of the situation too?"

"My friends needed to know what they were getting into, I told them when we all had lunch with my father last week. The senior staff are also aware of the situation though Dumbledore and Snape are not trusted by Gringotts."

Bill was nodding, having already been made aware of some of that. "What I was going to say was that your current defence lessons are fine for getting to know your classmates but you need more..."

Hermione couldn't believe she actually interrupted a teacher but this needed to be said. "Sir, I sat there today and felt useless. I didn't like it. Harry warned us it might be dangerous to be around him and we all accepted that. What I'm trying to say here is, if there are any extra lessons on how to defend yourself I so want to be included. I'll bet Padma and Neville will say the same."

"Four is a small enough number to work with so I have no problem with that, should I take this suggestion to your father?"

This certainly got a smile from Harry. "Yes please. Could you also tell him what happened today, I know he's been really worried about it."

"Okay, providing you and your friends get down to dinner. What you did today was brilliant but now you need to follow through. There's no point of making such an impression only to go and waste it by hiding out in a toilet. Your other two friends are waiting outside, Miss Patil won't enter a boy's toilet and Mr Longbottom's not yet got the confidence to deal with Myrtle."

Hermione helped Harry to his feet and then gave him the hug she couldn't because of his previous position. He needfully hugged her back before straightening out his clothes and offering Hermione his arm. Harry didn't know if he would be able to eat anything but respected the advice he'd been given. It was time to go down to dinner.

A/N thanks for reading

## Chapter 9

Molly Weasley was not having a good day, it started with the Daily Prophet being delivered and went rapidly downhill from there. Her 'Harry Potter' obsessed daughter had been crying for most of the day and Molly didn't know what to do to help her little girl.

The concerned mother had objected when Arthur first brought the confiscated book home from the ministry, claiming they must have been banned for a reason. Arthur assured her it was merely a children's story book, withdrawn for copyright purposes, and began to use the banned book for Ginny's bedtime stories. Well, compared to the boy-who-lived battling dragons to save the day, Babbitty Rabbitty and the ilk never had a look-in from then on with little Ginny Weasley.

She'd accompanied her four Hogwarts-bound brothers to Kings Cross on the first of September, hoping for a glimpse of her hero. Ginny had been disappointed but consoled herself with the fact that she would be in Gryffindor next year, along with Harry Potter. Today's Prophet had shattered those youthful fantasies and broken her little heart.

As if that wasn't bad enough, Molly had just received a disturbing letter from Ron. Her first instinct was to rush to Hogwarts and start using her wand but her youngest son's ramblings just didn't make sense to his mother. For a start, he had three older brothers in the same house. Molly couldn't believe they would stand back and let their youngest brother be mistreated. Then there was Minerva and Albus to consider. The Head of Gryffindor was very protective of her charges and Molly couldn't even consider anything happening to one of her children while Albus Dumbledore was at Hogwarts. She had decided to wait and discuss the matter with her husband before taking any action.

Molly was surprised when she heard the family clock chime that someone was traveling, seconds before she heard the floo activate. She headed for the kitchen thinking Arthur must have finished early today when her squeal of delight rattled every window in the Burrow. "BILL!"

His mother's hug and relentless questions were sharply cut-off by the floo activating again and Ron stepping out. Her attention instantly switched to her youngest son.

"Ronald Weasley, what are you doing home?"

When the floo activated for the third time, discharging Minerva McGonagall, Molly's eyes narrowed as her gaze zeroed in on a red faced Ron. "Just what is going on here?"

Ron never said a word, just stood there with his head bowed. It was left to his head of house to break the awkward silence. "Molly, I need to speak to you regarding Ronald's behaviour while at Hogwarts."

Molly grabbed Ron by the ear and dragged him over to the table. "Sit there and don't move, I'll be back when I find out just how much trouble you're in. Minerva, will you come through to the sitting room?"

As they headed out the kitchen, Bill suddenly had another redheaded female Weasley in his arms. Ginny had clearly heard her mother's yell and now launched herself at her favourite brother from the bottom of the stairs. He twirled her around the kitchen before sitting his sister down on the table. "Hey Gin, you've done some growing since the last time I was home. Let me get a look at you."

Bill noticed at once that his sister had been crying and was immediately concerned, she was normally such a happy-go-lucky child. "What's the matter with my favourite sister? You and mum had a fight?"

"Oh no Bill, it was just reading about Harry Potter in the Prophet that got me upset..."

Ron may have been told to sit there but that didn't mean he had to listen this without saying something. "Why is everyone so obsessed with that prat? He's nothing special..."

"Is that why you decided to curse him in the great hall today, because you were so jealous of a nothing special prat? What the hell were you thinking? The twins told me that was the second time

you've used that curse, and you didn't even apologise to the girl you hit with it."

"I didn't mean to hit her with it, I was aiming at Crow's girlfriend..."

Ginny let a shriek out at this revelation. "Harry's got a girlfriend?"

"Yeah, bint by the name of Granger. She walks around the castle all day on his arm, it's enough to make you sick."

Ginny burst into tears at this news and raced back to her room while Bill grabbed Ron by the front of his robes and hauled him over the table. "What the hell is your problem? Things not going perfect in little Ronnie's world so he decides to throw a tantrum and make everyone else miserable too? Making a fool of yourself seems to be the only thing you're excelling at, not looking good for that first Hogwarts report card Ronnie boy."

Anyone hurting his sister was always going to receive a hard time from Bill, but for one of her brothers to deliberately do so was just too much. Ron needed some facts of life explained here. "Had that curse hit Harry today, he would have made mincemeat of you. He's a goblin warrior who would have treated that curse, quite rightly, as an attack. Spitting up a few slugs wouldn't even slow him down, and he could have legally done you some serious harm. I saw him outsmart and take down an adult wizard in my class today, you wouldn't have stood a chance against 'nothing special' Crow."

Molly and Minerva re-entered the kitchen and his mother didn't hang about. "Bill, put him down."

"You're a whining little git who is an embarrassment to this family. It's time to grow up Ronnie, you're no longer seven years old - so stop acting like someone who is." Bill let his youngest brother slide back into his seat while addressing Ron's head of house. "Minerva, I don't care whether Harry allows it, I will not have him in my class. I refuse to teach Ron any magic he could use on someone else next time he has a temper tantrum. Excuse me ladies, I have a sister this prat upset, she needs a big brother who will actually comfort her."

Molly knew Bill was Ginny's favourite brother for a reason, he was very protective of her. That Ron had managed to cause so much trouble in so little time was another subject they would be discussing

when Arthur got home. "Ron, you have been suspended from Hogwarts for the rest of the week. You will be allowed to return on Sunday but will be on probation for the rest of first year. Should you be in serious trouble again during your probation, you will be expelled from Hogwarts. You have carried out magical attacks on two people in the space of a week, just what are you playing at?"

"Oh right, blame me for everything. Don't bother about what's happening to me? I even got my wand broken!"

Minerva was in no mood to make any concessions here. "Mr Weasley, in both cases you were the aggressor. Your wand was indeed damaged in a tussle with Mr Crow, but only after you had cursed one of his friends in the corridor. You seem to think Ronald Weasley should be immune to retaliation - or punishment. If you return to Hogwarts with this attitude, I guarantee you will not be in the castle for long. Excuse me Molly but I must return to Hogwarts. I hope you and Arthur can talk some sense into him, I would hate to see a Weasley being the first student expelled from Hogwarts in fifty years."

Molly was battling her temper as Minerva took the floo back to Hogwarts, she didn't want to start anything without Arthur's presence to reign her temper in if she was going too far. "Ron, go to your room. We will be speaking when your father gets home."

Ron tried his best pleading voice. "Mum, I didn't have any lunch. I was in the infirmary..."

"RONALD BILIUS WEASLEY - get to your room before I take my wand to you. You bring shame to this family and all you can think of is food? Get out of my sight."

Ron might be thick but even he wasn't stupid enough to argue with his mum when she was in this mood. He shot out of there and went straight to his room.

-oOoOo-

Bill entered Ginny's room to find his sister lying crying on her bed, clutching something to her chest. "Gin, please tell me what the problem is, I hate to see you like this - and I need to head to Gringotts shortly."



"Oh Bill, it's all falling to pieces. Harry's not a Potter, he's not even a Gryffindor and already has a girlfriend."

As Ginny continued to sob, Bill slid the book out her grasp. The image of a bespectacled, skinny young boy with the lightning bolt scar on his forehead jumped off the cover, and gave Bill a huge clue to what he was dealing with here. "You know Harry looks nothing like this? He doesn't wear glasses and there's no scar - he's also a far handsomer young man than this..."

Bill had instantly grabbed Ginny's attention - and saw his sister's tears dwindle at the same time. "You've met him?"

"I was brought back from Egypt to be his defence tutor at Hogwarts, I left him less than an hour ago."

Ginny's tears had all but disappeared now, her curiosity easily kicking self-pity's arse. "What's he like? Tell me everything...does he really have a girlfriend?"

"He's like you Gin, much too young to be thinking about girlfriends and boyfriends. His best friends are Hermione and Padma, both of whom were trapped in the Hogwarts infirmary by a troll. Harry raced to their rescue and killed that troll with his sword. The real Harry is much better than any story Gin, he also hates all that boy-who-lives rubbish."

Bill could see his sister was hanging on his every word so tried to steer her away from this unhealthy obsession she appeared to have. "The twins are already becoming friends of his, purely because they treat him as Harry Crow. He'll still be there when you go to Hogwarts next year Ginny. Just remember, he's real and this book is just stories the author made-up. Oh, and you'll need to be at least twenty six before I will even consider letting you have a boyfriend!"

At that, Ginny jumped into his arms. Bill thought at least he'd managed to cheer his sister up. He did think that she was much too young to be thinking about boyfriends, and what he said about Harry was also true. He didn't have the heart to tell Ginny that when Harry was old enough to start thinking about such things, it was already obvious who his thoughts would be turning to.

-oOoOo-

Bill found his mother in the kitchen, nursing a strong cup of tea. "Minerva tells me you're tutoring at Hogwarts?"

"Yeah, the director himself asked me to return to Britain and do this. I actually need to head off to the bank now, there are some meetings I really must attend. Once my schedule settles down a bit, I hope to have more time to spend at home."

"You're not staying here?"

Bill was shaking his head. "Tutoring Harry is only part of my work, they have other stuff for me to do that I've still to hear about. They badly wanted me to take this job so included a flat for me to use as well. I still intend to be home for dinner as often as I can though."

This had Molly smiling for the first time today, having her family around the dinner table was her favourite thing. "She also told me you witnessed what Ron did today, I have no idea what to make of this."

After watching the prat upset Ginny, Bill wasn't for pulling any punches. "Ron sees me as a curse-breaker, he ignores all the hard work I put in to get where I am. Charlie works just as hard at his profession, and we've all seen the hours Percy puts into his studies. Oh, the twins tell me he has a very pretty distraction at Hogwarts, the fifth year Ravenclaw girls' prefect apparently said yes when Percy asked her to be his girlfriend. Our Ron has always been a shirker, expecting everything to drop into his lap. If he doesn't grow out of that habit real soon, he's in for a rude awakening."

Molly was nodding in agreement. "I don't know where he picked the habit up from, none of the rest of you are like that. Even Fred and George work hard at being the biggest pair of scamps they can be. I hope your father has some ideas because I don't know what to do with him. His education is hanging by a thread and all he was concerned about was missing lunch."

-oOoOo-

Albus was pouring a second firewhisky for the minister, while wondering if he should employ Abe? All these shocking revelations

were quickly turning his office into a bar, and his younger brother was the recognised Dumbledore family expert on those.

"He can't be back Albus, this has to be some horrible mistake?"

"Minerva's reaction was pretty much the same as yours Cornelius, and she saw him with her own eyes. As much as we don't want it to be true, it doesn't change the fact that it is."

"If this gets out, it will make today's headlines appear like a picnic."

"Not if we're ready Cornelius, the good news is I think we have time to prepare." Fudge was now sipping his second drink, after having gulped the first one down. Albus took this as a good sign so attempted to steer the Minister of Magic in the direction he wanted the ministry to go.

"We need to quietly beef-up the auror department, in both training and manpower. When the story eventually reaches the public, as we both know it must, you can rightfully say that the ministry are not only prepared but ready to respond to the threat. I will give you all the backing I can within the Wizengamot."

The minister liked the sound of that, Dumbledore's idea made him appear like a man of action. That he would actually have a plan in place beforehand to deal with a problem would also make a welcome change. "What can we do about the Potter situation? I need to have some answers for the press or I won't be able to do anything, the public will have me out on the street."

"I suggest we tell them the truth."

This confused the minister until Albus told him the truth. Well, this version of the truth might be slanted in Albus Dumbledore's favour - but the old wizard never told any lies. "After the Potters were murdered, I left baby Harry with his Aunt, Lily's sister. I thought he'd be safer growing up in the muggle world, away from all the madness that's become attached to being the boy-who-lived. What I hadn't counted on was them not wanting the boy, I just couldn't believe they would give their own flesh and blood away."

Cornelius was having trouble believing that himself. "They actually gave him away?"

"They didn't want the boy but thankfully also wanted to avoid a muggle orphanage." The very thought of Harry Potter having the same upbringing as Tom Riddle sent a shudder through Albus. "His uncle managed to take Harry to Diagon Alley where he wandered into Gringotts. The muggle wanted to just dump the baby on a counter and leave him there but the goblins weren't having that."

"They should have contacted the ministry at once..."

"Think back Cornelius, what state was the ministry in? That's why I left Harry at his muggle aunt's in the first place. If we didn't know who we could trust, how were the goblins supposed to choose a safer option than keeping Harry themselves? They clearly knew how important the child was."

"When did you discover this and why didn't you do something about it?"

"It wasn't until the Christmas holidays later that year that I had an opportunity to return and check on the child, only to discover that he was no longer there. They had signed something called an escrow agreement that legally handed responsibility for Harry over to the goblins."

"Surely there must have been something you could do?"

"Of course I headed straight to Gringotts, only to be informed the contract was unbreakable. Needless to say I wasn't happy with that, I ended up being barred from Gringotts the same day." If the minister left Hogwarts with the impression that Albus had fought for Harry's freedom until the goblins kicked him out, that was okay with the headmaster.

"I still think the goblins should have informed us of what was happening..."

"Cornelius, I have met the goblin Harry calls father, they are as close as any father / son I've seen. In any fight against the dark lord, Harry is going to be our best weapon. Attacking that goblin, or even Gringotts, in public or the Prophet could see us lose that weapon forever."

This now had the minister's entire focus. "What should we do then?"

"We thank the goblins for looking after young Harry, and helping the lad become the outstanding young man he is." This had Fudge totally confused until Albus explained his reasoning. "The escrow agreement ends when the head of the Potter family decrees it to be so, or when Harry finally comes of age. That is all the time we have to ensure that Harry makes the decision we both want, and then takes his rightful place in our society. We have both now seen how Harry responds to a heavy-handed approach, we have to change tactics or risk losing him forever."

"The Prophet reported that he rejected approaches from respected families, how are we to influence his decision if he continues to ignore us?"

"The boy is very friendly with a muggle born witch he met on the train, and has since grown closer to Miss Patil and Mr Longbottom. The only approaches I know he's rebuffed were from the Weasley and Malfoy boys, both were rather heavy-handed. He's mixing quite well with his peers but when anyone pushes him, he pushes right back."

This brought up the prickly issue of what to do about the senior Malfoy. "If we put Lucius on public trial, it might start the very thing we're trying to avoid - mass panic over you-know-who's return." It also went unsaid between the two wizards just how close Cornelius was to Lucius Malfoy. A public trial could also see the minister out on the street.

Albus was perfectly happy for Cornelius to retain the Minister of Magic position, provided he was doing what Albus Dumbledore wanted the minister to do. "Lucius is not a particularly powerful wizard. His main threats are his influence and money, you can seriously damage that influence Cornelius. After all, you are the Minister of Magic."

"I know this Albus but that doesn't affect his finances. He's more than spiteful enough to place his great wealth behind someone else, a rival ministerial candidate inside the ministry."

"Ah Cornelius, you're forgetting what else happened inside that classroom. Lucius Malfoy drew his wand on a young goblin, a

particularly well-connected young goblin - who also has a powerful father. I feel sure the goblins could be persuaded to attack Lucius where it will really hurt him, financially."

The sly old wizard could see Cornelius liked this idea. It would get him out from under Malfoy's influence without the threat of Lucius mounting a challenge on his position as minister.

"Do you really think the goblins would assist us in this?"

If Albus was right, and he was sure he was, the goblins had planned today's entire performance in the hope of achieving an opening to do that very thing. He would quite happily take the credit in the minister's eyes because that gave Albus another lever to manipulate Cornelius in the direction he needed him to go. "I'm certain I can convince them to aid us in this matter."

It was a puzzled minister who asked the glaringly obvious question. "How can you do that Albus when you're currently banned from Gringotts?"

Albus was now really regretting how he'd handled that interview with Barchoke. Filius' assessment of the situation had been uncannily accurate. Barchoke had obviously known what was about to happen and had traveled to Hogwarts in the hope of working with its headmaster. Albus had grossly underestimated the quality of the players he'd sat down with and, as a result, found himself kicked from the game. He had no idea how much of their plans had been revealed today, though a motivated and trained Harry was certainly making a lot more sense to the headmaster than his original option. Had a Dursley raised Harry Potter arrived at Hogwarts, Albus was sure they would have found dead bodies that day in the infirmary. With three of the heads of houses clearly in Harry's corner, Albus badly needed some way of getting back to the game table.

Surprisingly, Cornelius' question gave Albus the answer he was looking for. "I have known the Weasleys for generations, and William since he was a baby. I'm positive I can convince him to aid us in this endeavour."

"He works for Gringotts Albus, the goblins don't take kindly to their employees working for someone else. You could destroy that lad's career."

"Sometimes, for the greater good, sacrifices have to be made." Albus could see this didn't sit too well with Cornelius' somewhat skewed morals, he decided to make the deal more palatable for the minister. "William is a highly-skilled former Hogwarts head boy. Should he need a career change, there will always be a position available for him in the castle."

The headmaster was now thinking there could be a hidden bonus for him here. Should William lose his job at Gringotts, Hogwarts would acquire a ready-made defence professor while Albus Dumbledore would have the young wizard's gratitude. Those were the kind of schemes Albus favoured. Where everybody appears to win but he comes out on top, with information he badly needed, a new defence professor and another person left thinking they were in his debt.

-oOoOo-

With Hermione on his arm and both his friends beside him, Harry was able to walk into dinner as normal. It was already obvious that the story had spread but they decided to ignore it. Harry was filling his plate when Roger attempted to break the awkward silence that had grown around the trio. "So Harry, did you have a nice boring defence lesson?"

"Oh same old same old Roger. I had a few discussions on defence and I think I managed to get my point across."

This had Roger laughing. "Harry, you're too much. Take down Lucius Malfoy, in front of the Minister of Magic! Hogwarts certainly knew what it was doing when she made you her champion." This statement was met with general approval at the Ravenclaw table. They'd all heard the rumours concerning Quirrell and Voldemort but considered themselves safe inside Hogwarts. After all, hadn't Dumbledore chased him out the castle?

Roger then turned his attention to Hermione. "Nice handprint on Malfoy junior Hermione, you and Harry here seem determined to put some colour into his cheeks."

"Well, now he knows I've got Harry's back." Hermione's statement said a lot more than that. Every witch in Ravenclaw recognised

exactly what she was saying, Hermione was not for being parted from Harry without a fight.

Padma was chuckling to herself at her friends antics'. If these two got any closer, you would soon need crowbars to separate them. The play on Harry's name kept Padma amused for the rest of dinner time. Her friends were happy so death eaters and dark wizards could be forgotten about for now. She would need to write home though, her parents needed to know that information. The Patils would not be welcome in a Britain run by people like the Malfoys.

When Parvati asked for a quiet word, she thought nothing of it. That opinion soon changed when she heard what her sister had to say. "There's a group of girls who don't like how close Hermione is to Harry, they intend to have a 'talk' with her about it."

"What! Are they out of their tiny minds? Harry will go nuts if they as much as upset Hermione, Merlin help them if anyone goes for a wand. Who's involved in this?"

"As far as we know, it started in Slytherin. They took to heart what the Prophet said this morning. They want to see Harry becoming a Potter, but with a pureblood witch at his side. Gryffindor was approached by Hufflepuff to see if we were interested..."

Padma wanted an answer immediately. "And what was Gryffindor's reply?"

"Do I want to get closer to him, absolutely - but not like this Padma. We watched Harry against that troll, and then again today in defence. Harry Crow is not someone you want as your enemy. You're his friend, we've both seen first-hand how protective Harry is of those. Hermione is his best friend and I pity anyone who lays as much as a finger on her, we both know they won't get any pity or mercy from Harry. Gryffindor house wanted nothing to do with this, and gave the puffs something to think about."

"Do you know if Ravenclaw house was approached?"

"I think they were looking at the older year groups. I'm pretty sure most of the first years would give them the same answer Gryffindor did. You guys are too well-liked for anyone to go against. That and Harry can be rather scary at times."



"Were the first year Slytherins involved?"

"We heard it was the second years, with even a couple of third years interested. I don't think they got anywhere near the response they expected, I just wanted to pass this on to you. If they go ahead, they'll try and get Hermione alone. Keep an eye on her Padma."

The sisters hugged before heading off to their respective houses. Padma wasn't sure if she should say anything, why worry Hermione when the whole thing might fall flat before it got off the ground? She decided to stick even closer to Hermione for the rest of the week and see what happened from there.

-oOoOo-

Bill was shown directly into Barchoke's office and, after the courtesy of greeting was over, proceeded to tell the goblin exactly what happened in his son's defence class today. He also tagged on the bit in the toilet though left out the confrontation with Ron before the class started.

Goblins were normally very good at hiding their emotions but Bill detected a mixture of pride and relief from this important figure inside Gringotts.

"Curse-breaker Weasley, you are an astute young man. By this time you will have figured the increased pay and supplied accommodation is not just for teaching some eleven year olds defence. I am really pleased that you have already offered Harry and his three closest friends extra lessons, saves me having to make the suggestion. Where we go from here depends entirely on how much I and Gringotts can trust you?"

Bill was now sweating. For a goblin to bring up the issue of trust was either very good, or incredibly bad - there was no middle ground. "Master Barchoke, I have always given of my best in my work for Gringotts, I have no intention of changing that. If the issue of trust regards your son, I feel there are some questions I would like answers to before offering further commitment. Today was a plan well executed for aims I totally support. I think before I can honestly commit myself further, I would need to know what the ultimate aims of Gringotts are here."

This worryingly drew a smile from the goblin. "You were not our only candidate for the position you now find yourself in, but you were my choice. Even asking those questions confirms my high opinion of you is justified. Our first goal is the total destruction of the creature who calls himself Voldemort, taking as many of his followers with him as we can."

"Master Barchoke, that is a goal that will have my full support. Anything I can do to bring this about, Gringotts can trust me to perform with every fibre of my being."

"Well said Curse-breaker, we will go into what else is required of you in a moment. The only other goal that Gringotts has here is a long-term objective to promote goblin / wizard relations. We have no wish to rule over anyone, just not be treated as nothing more than a financial version of a house-elf. Those poor creatures may have a need to serve wizards, goblins do not."

"Again, a goal and views that have my total support. My only concern in this matter is your son. Harry is after all only eleven, this is a mighty big responsibility to place on anyone's shoulders - far less one so young."

"That is a concern for more than just the two of us in this room. Harry needs someone he can talk to, discuss things with while in the castle. You have no idea how pleased I was to see he had made some close friends, especially Miss Granger. You will have observed from your time working with us that goblins are not a race that outwardly display their affections. Seeing my son accepting, and revelling in, being wrapped in Miss Granger's arms was a welcome sight for these old eyes. Harry though needs something else too, he badly needs an adult in that castle he can trust. We are hoping that can be you? Whether your relationship becomes that of a mentor or an older brother figure would be left up to you and Harry."

Bill now understood why the issue of trust was mentioned, this was huge. "I am honoured you would even consider me for this role. Can I ask more about Harry? What training has he already had, how did he respond to that training? Those types of thing."

Barchoke had to think for a moment, more so he could sort his own thoughts on the matter. "My son is a very driven individual who

doesn't understand the meaning of defeat. When he was younger, he obviously noticed he was different from everyone else around him. As you can imagine, this caused a few difficulties at our school. When he got into fights though, Harry would never stay down. He always struggled to his feet and fought back as best he was able. This earned him respect and soon, he was the one doing the 'knocking down'."

Having observed him taking a curse to ensure Malfoy got hit, Bill had no trouble believing that.

"I have never believed in keeping things from my son, he knows Voldemort targeted him because of the prophecy - and his parents gave their lives protecting him. Learning that his only living relatives totally rejected him deeply affected my son."

This drew a loud 'what?' from Bill before Barchoke continued. It was clear that even the memory of this angered the goblin. "That fat illegitimate son of an forest troll sat right where you are now and dumped Harry on my desk like so much soiled laundry. Not gutting him where he sat remains one of the greatest regrets of my life. This knowledge has haunted Harry though as he appears to fear rejection above all else, that was why I was so delighted to see him as attached to Miss Granger. He needlessly worries that one day I will reject him too, that day will never come. Whatever decision Harry makes about his future, he will always be my son. Nothing in this world is more important to me than him."

This was what Bill needed to hear. The thought of that young boy being used as a goblin weapon was not something that sat well with the eldest Weasley boy. Training young Harry to survive a prophesied fight against a dark lord was an entirely different matter.

He then listened intently as the proud father told of how his son's skill with a blade, and lightning reflexes had eventually won him much respect in a nation of warriors. That Master Pitslay considered Harry his prodigy, even traveling to Hogwarts to continue his potions tuition was another proud boast. "You will never have to motivate Harry, rather try and not let my son push himself too hard. His teachings in defence have mostly been of the physical type, we didn't have too many options when it came to someone who could fire curses at him with a wand - not without putting the secret that Harry was living in Gringotts at risk."

Bill was now looking forward to teaching Harry and his friends but Barchoke wasn't finished yet. "In order to survive death, Voldemort undertook the vilest of magic and split his soul. A horcrux had attached itself to my son - something that Dumbledore ignored. It was quickly removed and destroyed after Harry arrived at Gringotts. Another was discovered in a convicted death eater's vault, it too had his soul portion removed and then banished forever. Our nation then went quietly hunting for more, uncovering another at his grandparent's hovel. Since then, nothing."

As part of his curse-breaker training, Bill had learned about horcruxes. He shared the goblin view that an individual who could make one was abhorrent - this was a crime against mother nature herself. It hadn't been considered possible for an individual to make more than one, so this was a shocking revelation. "Have we any idea how many he made?"

"No, though him surviving the death of Quirrell last week confirms there is at least one more still out there. Apart from that one fact, all we have is speculation and guesswork. That same speculation and guesswork places a high probability that there might be another one hidden inside Hogwarts. Harry's status as a Hogwarts Champion will surely help us there, I can't imagine the castle will want to have a piece of the darkest magic imaginable within her walls."

"Does Dumbledore know about this? Doing anything under his nose just bumps up the degree of difficulty by a large margin."

"The Director and I both think it's only a matter of time before Dumbledore approaches you, with an appeal to keep him informed about Harry and Gringotts."

"Master Barchoke, I can assure you and the director that Albus Dumbledore will learn nothing from me."

"Actually, curse-breaker, the Director and I would prefer if Albus Dumbledore learned quite a bit from you. Of course, we will tightly control exactly what the meddling headmaster learns."

Bill's jaw nearly dropped to the floor as the full implications of what it would take to earn his new salary and accommodation hit home. It

was becoming painfully obvious that tutoring Harry was only going to be a small part of his new duties.

A/N thanks for reading.

## Chapter 10

Amelia Bones wasn't happy that she had been blocked from administering veritaserum to Lucius Malfoy, and had been neither slow nor quiet when voicing this displeasure to the minister. Her rage was somewhat sated on discovering Cornelius' reasoning - or should that be Dumbledore's?

That the minister actually had a contingency plan was a shock. This initial shock though was no where near the intensity of the one she received when being informed that her department was basically going to be brought up to a war footing. There would be a heavy recruitment programme that would see auror numbers swell by over fifty percent in the next three years.

Amelia was prepared to trade-off delaying justice to a thoroughly defanged Malfoy for an auror department that had some real teeth. She didn't tell the blond ponce this, Amelia didn't tell Malfoy anything - rather just left him in a cell to sweat. She could legally hold him for one more day but Thursday was the deadline, Amelia was taking great pleasure in keeping him locked up for every available minute she could.

Today saw her back at Hogwarts. She was interviewing Harry Crow in the presence of his head of house. Amelia was determined to get as much information as possible from the young man before her meeting with Dumbledore. The more the head of the DMLE wrote down, the angrier she was becoming. It was obvious Dumbledore had known Voldemort wasn't gone for good, why else would he set a trap for the dark lord? That he had used Hogwarts as a location for this trap had Amelia wanting to slap the old fool silly. Was it any wonder the Hogwarts ghosts were telling him he was on his last warning.

Harry was just explaining what happened in the infirmary when the Bloody Baron passed through the wall. "Young Champion, your friends require aid..."

Amelia watched amazed as the ghost hadn't even finished speaking yet Harry was heading out the door. She and Filius shot out after him but the younger and much fitter Harry was already opening up a gap. Both followed as quickly as they could while the castle's portraits and ghosts led their champion where he needed to go.

-oOoOo-

Padma was beside Hermione as both girls were rinsing their hands in the wash basins. She noticed in the mirror that the large toilet was now filling up behind them and her heart sank. Neville had gone ahead to the great hall and Harry was at a meeting with Madam Bones, this group had judged their approach perfectly. She counted nine of them, all older than her and Hermione, before the group's 'leader' decided to speak.

"Granger, we want a word with you."

Hermione turned around and was confronted with nine older girls glaring at her. They were mostly Slytherins but she was sorry to see a couple of Hufflepuffs mixed in there too, the sole Ravenclaw was particularly painful. The entire situation brought up some particularly unpleasant memories of her primary school, memories that Hermione thought she was finished with.

"Yes, what can I do for you?"

"You can stay well away from Potter, that bloodline doesn't need another mudblood in it."

Hermione's insides were like jelly but she wasn't about to let that show, she'd learned this just from being around Harry. "Well, that shouldn't be a problem - since I don't know anyone called Potter."

"Don't get smart with us Granger, you know fine well who we're talking about. It took us nearly three days to catch you more than six inches away from him. That's going to change, if you know what's good for you."

Hermione may have been shaking inside yet the young witch was determined she wouldn't let them see any tears. She certainly took their threat seriously but there was no way Hermione could comply with their demands. She was already sure not being Harry's best friend would be far more painful than anything they could do to her. "Oh I know what's good for me, that's why I have no intention of moving from Harry's side."

Padma tried to butt in, knowing Hermione wouldn't back down on this. "Have you any idea what Harry will do when he hears about this? You lot have just bought yourselves more trouble than you can possibly imagine."

"Shut it Patil, no one will be saying anything to Potter."

"Yeah, we haven't forgotten your sister's blatant attempt to get off with him either. Batting those eye-lashes while offering up a life debt, the Potter bloodline doesn't need tainted with your lot either."

Hermione couldn't just stand there and ignore the racist comment against both her friends. "Wouldn't that be Harry's decision?"

The lone Ravenclaw in the group then decided to make herself heard. "Listen Granger, once you break-up with him, a proper pureblood witch will step in and console the boy-who-lived."

The very thought of having to sit back and watch Harry with another girl hardened Hermione's conviction. "Never going to happen, I will be at Harry's side for as long as he wants me to be."

"Looks like we'll have to do this the hard way girls. Let's make sure our Harry never wants to go near the bitch ever again."

Hermione felt herself being hit by two curses to her face before Padma move to offer some protection. This resulted in her friend getting cursed too. There was then a loud animalistic roar before everything went to hell in a hand basket.

Harry burst straight into the girls toilet and quickly took action. There was no 'what's going on here?' - his training had taught him you didn't waste time on such niceties. There were nine enemies crowded around Padma and Hermione, all appeared older than his friends and had their wands out. Both his friends had already taken some hits and Padma had clearly jumped in front of Hermione to offer some protection. Harry let out a roar as his knife went to work.

The nine girls thought they couldn't lose, they were only up against two firsties. Suddenly there was a devil amongst them, a devil that punched, kicked and sliced his way through them in seconds. Screams of pain and shock were heard as wands and bodies hit the floor. By the time Filius and Amelia got there, eight of the girls were



on the floor. Most had been physically struck on some part of their body but all had either the back of their hand slashed open or their wand cut right through. Harry currently had the large Slytherin girl who'd been at the front of the confrontation pinned against the wall, with his blade poised at her left eyeball. The girl had blood dripping from her wounded hand, and liquid of a different colour pooling between her feet. The Slytherin had somewhat understandably wet herself from fright.

"Tell me why and make it good. Otherwise, I'm taking this eye in payment."

The girl was now sobbing in terror and clearly incapable of speech, Amelia had her wand out and was about to intervene when the two victims beat her to it.

Hermione was incapable of speech at the moment but her gentle hand on Harry's shoulder grabbed his attention. The sheer ferocity behind the stinging hex had left Hermione practically unrecognisable while her two front teeth were now about six inches long - and still growing.

Padma's face was covered in painful-looking boils but she was left to do the talking. "They wanted Hermione to stop being friends with you Harry. When she said that was never going to happen, they started firing curses. Apparently, Hermione and I are not the right sort of friends you should have."

Harry's temper seemed to spike at this news and the Slytherin girl's eyes rolled back in her head as her legs gave way. He let her slump to the wet toilet floor in a dead faint, now far more concerned with the condition of his friends.

Amelia and Filius watched on as the anger dissipate from the young Ravenclaw, that Harry's anger was replaced by tenderness and compassion was so at odds with the carnage he'd just wreaked. That the evidence of said carnage was scattered all about them just made the gentle emotions now on display all the more pronounced.

"You told nine of them never?"

Hermione could barely nod her head but she managed to get her point across. Harry sheathed his knife and offered her his arm. "My lady?"

She wasn't physically able to smile at the moment but inside Hermione was extremely happy as she took Harry's arm. To her mind, this was easily worth all the pain she was currently suffering. He offered his other arm to Padma before facing the two adults who had stopped at the doorway. "Master Flitwick, I'm taking my friends to the infirmary. I will be there if anyone requires to speak with me. I give everyone fair warning though, should anything like this ever be repeated, I will not be so lenient again."

The girls on the floor quickly crawled out their way to create a clear path for the trio to leave, they were all desperate to see the back of Harry Crow.

Filius sent a patronus message to the great hall, he wanted the other heads of house and the headmaster to see this. The sight of the third year Ravenclaw on the floor was particularly distasteful for her head of house. Filius was left to wonder if it was coincidence Miss Chambers appeared to have been hit the worst. The girl had a bruise forming on her cheek with a black eye sure to follow, she was nursing her bleeding right hand while staring at a severed wand on the floor.

Amelia was staring at the devastation wrought here, knowing Harry could have arrived at the very most half a minute before they did. "He didn't care that they were girls, Crow just went right through them."

"When someone holds a weapon on you Madam Bones, it makes no difference if they are male or female. For Master Sharpshard to even consider teaching the lad, he must be exceptional with a blade. To be honest, I would have struggled to accomplish this in the time he had available. There is not an injury here that Poppy won't be able to fix within ten minutes, the memory of what Mr Crow was able to do will last a lot longer than the pain."

The senior staff were soon on site with Pomona's keen eyes quickly picking out the two Hufflepuffs involved. "Only Mr Crow could cause this amount of damage. Let me guess, these girls took the Prophet

article to heart and confronted Miss Granger? I'd heard whispers of something like this was being discussed but thought Hufflepuff had wisely decided to take Gryffindor's approach and give such nonsense a miss. What did they do to Miss Granger?"

Filius was impressed at Pomona's reasoning, he supplied the answers for the rest of the group. "Miss Granger took a stinging hex to the face as well as a *densaueo*, it would appear disfigurement was their main objective here. Miss Patil also suffered *furnunculus*, whether she was deliberately targeted or trying to protect Miss Granger remains to be uncovered. Both young ladies left on Mr Crow's arm."

Minerva and Severus were casting *episkey* on the girls' hands to heal the cuts and stop the bleeding. The potions master was not a happy head of house. "This is what happens when you let a child carry a knife..."

Filius wasn't standing for that. "Yes, six Slytherin bullies with drawn wands get their arses kicked. Before you start raving about punishing Mr Crow, you should know it was the Bloody Baron himself that warned Harry his friends were under attack. Hogwarts then led him directly to this location. The castle appears to have taken a stand on this matter, to go against Hogwarts in this is not wise Severus." Filius now settled his gaze on the lone Ravenclaw present. "I can assure everyone here Miss Chambers will pay dearly for her part in this cowardly attack."

"As will my two Hufflepuffs, I can't express how ashamed I am of them."

Severus couldn't let it go though. "And what of Crow, is he to once more escape any form of punishment?"

She wasn't strictly speaking involved in this discussion but Amelia offered her opinion. "There were nine older girls here, all with the intention of doing Miss Granger harm. I would say Mr Crow's response was a measured one. None of these girls will require to spend the night in the infirmary, Miss Granger certainly would have needed to if Mr Crow hadn't acted so quickly."

"Amelia and I were less than a minute behind the lad but he'd already dealt with the situation by the time we got here. He did

promise not to be so lenient if there was ever a repeat of this incident."

"But he sliced right through my wand, what am I going to tell my parents?"

"Don't worry about that Miss Chambers. You can be assured I'll be informing your parents of exactly what happened here today. For a Ravenclaw to be involved in bullying a younger member of our house is something I will never stand for, this incident will be used to remind all of Ravenclaw of that fact."

"Headmaster, surely you can see this boy needs to be reigned in before the next thing he kills isn't a troll - but another student."

Albus was well aware his tenure as headmaster was hanging by a thread. He had no intention of going against Hogwarts to sooth his potion master's sense of injustice. "I'm inclined to agree that Mr Crow's response was measured and appropriate. A wizard would have been casting stunners or body-binds. Mr Crow's methods may be different but certainly no less effective. I watched him use that blade on Lucius Malfoy, his speed and control is astonishing. He's attending Hogwarts as a goblin, I assume this is a goblin response to what was undeniably an attack on his friends?"

His question was aimed at Filius and the charms master didn't disappoint. "Actually headmaster, his reaction was a lot more measured than I feared. The goblin response would have been to ensure this could never happen again, I expected to see limbs on the floor."

The girls had been quietly crying but this comment introduced an element of wailing to their accumulated outpouring of self pity, none of the adults present thought this group would ever be going near Miss Granger again. They also thought that was Mr Crow's intention, word of this would spread throughout the castle before curfew. Who would dare attack Miss Granger when her protector had taken down nine older enemies to keep the young witch safe. When you factored in his killing of that troll to achieve the same result, and that the castle had not only warned but aided him today, Miss Granger should be one of the safest witches in the castle.

Minerva though was determined to have her way on this matter. That there were no Gryffindors amongst the attackers pleased her more than she could say but the deputy was determined to enforce discipline here. Severus was more inclined to punish Slytherin students for getting caught, that wouldn't be happening this time.

"Hogwarts already has a student under a week's suspension, and placed on probation for the rest of the school year. If I discover this attack was because of Miss Granger's blood status - and I'm almost sure that was the case - all of these girls will be receiving the same punishment. Albus, could you cover my classes for the rest of today? I will probably need to arrange nine home visits."

Severus appeared ready to have a fit but Pomona cut him off. "That seems fair..."

Filius had more to add though. "Miss Chambers will also see her Hogsmead privileges revoked and she can forget about trying out for the quidditch team this year. I find her bullying of two Ravenclaw first years despicable, I hope you will convey that to her parents Professor McGonagall?"

The girls were now sobbing inconsolably as they were herded up and shepherded toward the infirmary so Poppy could check the nine of them. Minerva wanted a word with the other three involved in this debacle so she headed there too. Albus tagged along, content he now had a genuine excuse to put his meeting with Amelia off again. The headmaster intended to avoid said meeting for as long as possible.

Severus didn't think he would be able to attend the infirmary without getting into an argument with Crow. Having heard what he did to Lucius, the potions professor rather wisely decided to head back down to his dungeon.

-oOoOo-

The only thing that travels faster than news inside the castle is speculation. Speculation was currently rife amongst the students, especially after seeing the senior staff rush from the great hall. So it was hardly surprising that Neville and Parvati arrived at the infirmary only moments after the Ravenclaw trio got there. Both Gryffindors had quickly noticed who was missing, and thought this was the best

location to discover if anything had happened to their friends/family. Parvati was in tears seeing her twin's beautiful face in that condition. "I warned you they were after Hermione - how did this happen?"

This instantly got Harry's attention, Hermione was currently behind a privacy screen receiving treatment. Padma had her head down as she answered her twin. "We didn't know who, where or when so I decided not to worry Hermione, just stick close to her."

Harry reached for his friend's hand in an effort to get Padma to look at him. "That is the second time you've taken a curse meant for Hermione, though with this one you deliberately protected her. She can't say thank you at the moment so I'll say it for both of us."

"Am I going to have to get used to visiting my sister here if she hangs about with you Harry?"

Hearing the anger in her sister's voice, Padma cut in before Harry could answer. "That's why I'm getting extra lessons in defence from Professor Weasley - and you should see what Harry did to the girls who attacked us."

Parvati's eyes nearly bulged out at this - her sister was spending her time with the two hottest wizards in Hogwarts. She didn't get a chance to comment further on this though as both Parvati and Neville got an opportunity to see first hand what Harry had done to the attacking girls. The senior staff were leading the girls into the infirmary, it was hard to miss that every single one of them shied away from Harry.

Neville was amazed at the number of attackers his friends had faced, they just seemed to keep coming through the doors. Professor McGonagall entered along with the headmaster, her attention soon shifted from Dumbledore the instant she spotted Harry. "Mr Crow, a moment of your time please." All in the room knew this was not a request as the deputy headmistress led Harry back out the door.

She stopped in the empty corridor for a quiet word. "We find ourselves once more in this situation Mr Crow..."

"Only because people keep attacking my friends professor."

"I understand your concern and please trust me that every single one of those girls will be severely punished." She could see this had calmed Harry somewhat so Minerva continued with the discussion she'd pulled the lad out here for. "I have nothing but admiration for your willingness to protect your friends but do you remember the discussion we had the last time this happened? In this instance, you were sitting in a room with your head of house and the head of the DMLE. Do you doubt that either of them would have acted swiftly to protect your friends?"

Harry hadn't even thought about it. On discovering they needed help, he'd just blindly raced from the room. Even his training told him this was the wrong option to take, jumping into an unknown situation when he had very capable help right beside him. "No Professor, I trust both of them."

"Then you see why I once more must assign you detentions? Not for saving your friends - but because you had trusted adults on hand to take care of the situation for you."

"I understand Professor, you can't hammer the attackers and not punish me for breaking school rules too. It would leave you open to the charge of favouritism."

"I'm impressed you can see that Mr Crow, a certain other first year thought I was picking on him when handing out punishment. I feel in this case though, two nights with me working on transfiguration should be punishment enough."

Harry accepted this decision, knowing it was more a case of extra tuition rather than any form of punishment. Professor McGonagall confirmed this as she walked back into the infirmary with him. "I understand you might not want to leave your friends alone for a few days, they are of course welcome to accompany you on your detentions. I will arrange the times once I have dealt with these girls, they are going to keep me busy for now."

Filius was over in a flash. "Am I to understand Mr Crow has detention for his actions today?"

It was Harry who answered his head of house. "Sir, I earned my detentions. I should have let you deal with the problem and for that I apologise. I'm sure Professor McGonagall is also aware I would

probably do exactly the same thing again, which is another reason I deserve my detentions."

Poppy was still dealing with Miss Granger so Minerva spoke with the injured Miss Patil to discover exactly what happened in that toilet. When the screen came back, Hermione gave Harry a nervous smile and he instantly spotted the difference.

"You had your front teeth made smaller than they were before?"

"Madam Pomfrey managed to cancel the stinging hex, then shrank my front teeth. She gave me a mirror and asked me to say when to stop, I've always been teased about my teeth being too large."

"Well I think those doing the teasing were either blind or stupid. Thank you for remaining my friend Hermione, that couldn't have been easy..."

"Harry, easiest decision I ever made. I intend to be your best friend for as long as you'll let me..."

Harry had her in a tight hug before she could say anymore. "Thanks Hermione, I'm so glad to hear you say that - and to see you're okay."

"Padma jumped in front of me and then you arrived, otherwise it would have been a lot worse."

"Do these morons actually think attacking you is going to see us stop being best friends - that's just stupid!"

"So is them thinking they're better than Hermione because her parents are muggles. They can't pick on my blood status so the fact that the Patil family comes from India gets thrown in my face. Again, do they think I don't look into the mirror every morning? They are just bullies, using whatever words they need to justify their behaviour to themselves."

Hermione hugged and treated and once more boil-free Padma, "Thanks for sticking by me today, I never had friends who would do that before."

"I know you would do the same for me. Professor McGonagall has already heard what went on in that toilet, and Madam Pomfrey said



we can leave. Shall we take Professor Weasley's advice and head for the great hall?"

Harry led the way with Hermione on his arm, Neville and the twins right behind them. All three Ravenclaws were wondering just what Roger would have to say about this.

-oOoOo-

Lucius had plenty to say when he finally got home, his four days in a ministry holding cell responsible for his rant. "I knew Fudge was a fucking idiot, but I thought he was at least our fucking idiot - bought and paid for. Cornelius won't get a job cleaning up owl shit at the post office by the time I've finished with him. As for that bitch Bones, her days are numbered. She'll be top of our master's list ..." Lucius then noticed his wife appeared distraught, far more than his few days in a cell warranted. This worried her husband as Narcissa was normally so aloof, emotions were for lesser beings. She nervously handed him a scroll.

The Gringotts seal on the scroll alerted the head of the Malfoy family this was serious but reading what it contained terrified Lucius more than that blade against his chest. "Those bastards are closing down our vaults because of that little shit? I better get right over there, it's going to take most of the twenty-four hours they've given us to get everything out."

His wife though had some really bad news for him. "Lucius, that was delivered on Tuesday. The twenty-four hours has long since past."

"WHAT! Didn't you tell them I couldn't come to the bank?"

"They said that was not their problem..."

"What about our contacts at the ministry, didn't you get in touch with any of them?"

"I tried everyone we know, I even went to Bones and begged her to let you out for a few hours - all I got were excuses, apologies or doors slammed in my face."

Lucius now found himself holding on to the nearest wall to keep him standing upright. "Did you manage to get anything out?"

Narcissa tried not to let her anger show, but didn't quite manage it. "You put a cap on how much I could withdraw from the Malfoy vaults - one hundred thousand."

He was now leaning on the wall. "That won't last us very long..."

"It won't last at all, since I don't have it. I offered it to Fudge to get you out. I'm facing charges of attempting to bribe the Minister of Magic and the money was confiscated as evidence."

Lucius had now slid down the wall and was sitting on the floor as the blows kept coming. "I managed to transfer money to Hogwarts and pay for all seven years of Draco's education but, apart from taking my jewels, I was blocked from doing anything else. All we have left is the manor and its contents."

Just as he was thinking they had reached rock bottom, Lucius discovered there was more to come. "We also have a basket full of scrolls, every single one of them thanking us for our efforts but they no longer require us for their committee or board. Someone has really put the word out, just what the hell happened in Hogwarts on Monday?"

It was only now beginning to dawn on Lucius exactly what had happened in that classroom, he'd been trussed up and then stuffed better than any Christmas turkey. He swore vengeance on everyone involved in this conspiracy, especially Potter, Crow or whatever the little bastard called himself.

Lucius of course had contingency funds stashed where no one else could find them. Their lifestyle may take a downturn but they were a long way from being Weasley poor. The Malfoys change in circumstances would certainly put a swift end to funding anyone else. Those associates who had become reliant on what was basically a handout were now going to have to look elsewhere.

-oOoOo-

The Ravenclaw trio were at breakfast and looking forward to their extra defence lessons over the next two days. Bill had discussed suitable times with Harry's father and both had thought the weekends would be best. Harry had received word from his father to

say that the curse-breaker was now fully involved in their plans and could be totally trusted. With Bill now timetabled to be in the castle Monday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday - not forgetting Master Pitslay on a Friday - Harry felt a lot better about the Hogwarts situation.

That one of their own had been involved in attacking Padma and Hermione had put a strain on mealtimes at the Ravenclaw table. Most of the house knew Chambers was ambitious but all considered her actions to be a step too far. Hearing that there were advanced lessons on any subject available was always going to break through any awkward barriers amongst Ravenclaws. Harry had been politely deflecting requests to join them in these lessons all morning.

No one was getting too upset at being told these lessons were restricted to just the four of them, Padma's twin sister couldn't even bag a place - though most thought this was because her motives for wanting to attend clearly weren't purely academic ones.

Harry was already sharing his defence tutor with the rest of first year, the remainder of the school were stuck with study periods while the headmaster searched for a replacement. There were also another six first year claws sitting at the table with wide grins on their faces, Harry's potions tutor had allowed him to invite more of his friends to take his class. Every single person in three houses of Hogwarts understood those smiles, and wished they were wearing one just like it. Getting out of classes with Snape was certainly a good enough reason to smile.

Harry was unconsciously feeding Eargit a bit of his breakfast while reading the letter his beautiful snowy owl had just delivered. His father was passing on a warning that the Prophet had finally picked-up on the very large hints that had been getting dropped on them for the last few days. Gringotts had even taken the most unusual stance of affording the newspaper a statement. Harry was chuckling to himself when Hermione asked him what was so funny. As he noticed the Prophet being delivered, Harry told his best friend that the entire hall would find out in the next few minutes.

The ministry had been conducting what amounted to a charm offensive on Harry and the goblins, passing on little details to the press like how the boy-who-lived was not only healthy from his years

at Gringots - but incredibly fit. The Prophet left no young witches in any doubt what they meant by Harry being incredibly fit. They were currently running a 'competition' where they would pay handsomely for a picture of their young saviour. No mention of any returning dark lord was even hinted at.

Hermione had teased Harry that a photograph of him in his training gear would be worth a fortune, and how she wished her camera wasn't sitting in her bedroom back home. Harry had gotten his own back by offering to let her take said photograph - in exchange for a picture of Hermione in her Nike training clothes.

It didn't take that long for a screaming Malfoy to rush toward the Ravenclaw table and throw his copy of the Prophet at Harry. "You thieving goblin bastard - you stole my inheritance!"

Harry calmly stood to face the enraged boy as, for once, the staff moved quickly to intervene. Both their heads of house were on the scene to ensure this conflict didn't escalate beyond words.

"Mr Malfoy, the only part of your statement I agree with is that I am a goblin. Now, will you retract and apologise - or must we take this further?"

"It clearly says in the Prophet that the goblins have seized the Malfoy vaults - how is that not stealing?"

Harry didn't let the Slytherin's rage affect him, he'd been expecting this confrontation since reading the letter from his father. "The Prophet must have made a slight error. Those vaults belong to Gringotts, and are rented by the Malfoy family. As with any rental agreement, there are always conditions attached. An adult witch or wizard attempting to attack a young goblin with their wand certainly breaks those conditions and will see them kicked out of Gringotts. When my father heard what the head of the Malfoy family had attempted, he went straight to the director. It should also be noted that, as per the conditions of rental, your father was given twenty-four hours to retrieve anything he wanted from those vaults - before they were sealed."

"My father couldn't get there on time..."

"Again, the conditions of the rental contract allow for this. Had your father been too ill to get to the bank, the twenty-four hours would have been suspended until he was able to attend. In accordance with the conditions of the rental contract, being locked in a ministry cell is not an agreed and acceptable condition for suspension so the twenty-four hours lapsed. It's standard Gringotts banking practice that's taught to every young goblin - and perfectly legal."

Filius then asked a question he already knew the answer to, but wanted everyone else to hear. "What happens to the contents of those sealed vaults?"

Harry almost smiled at his head of house but that would ruin what he was trying to achieve here. "Because the vaults were not emptied in the allotted time, the bank will continue to take its small, annual rental fee for their continued use. The rest of the contents will remain untouched until someone is able to claim it."

Realisation began to sink in for some but Harry wanted no misunderstandings here. "In the case of the Malfoy vaults, that would be Draco when he came of age. This is of course assuming that he himself hasn't already broken those same banking conditions. Just to be clear Mr Malfoy, publicly calling me a 'thieving goblin bastard' over this matter shatters those conditions."

Harry gave Draco a moment to allow that information to sink in before speaking again. "Once more Mr Malfoy, will you retract and apologise - or must we take this further?"

Draco was many things but he wasn't a complete moron. The goblins had the Malfoys by the short and curly's, and he'd just given them a perfect excuse to yank those hairs out by the root. It was time to grovel - no matter how distasteful. Being poor was a far worse fate than eating some humble pie. "I apologise unreservedly Mr Crow, both for my lack of manners and the ill-informed comments I made. I now clearly see my statement was in error and retract every word spoken. I was not aware of what was involved in closing those vaults and acted in haste and anger."

"Perfectly understandable Mr Malfoy, even if it was regrettable. I'm quite prepared to accept your apology and forget the entire incident - this time."

Draco bowed in thanks, before turning to leave the great hall. The entire castle now knew Crow owned his arse, the very thought of that same arse dressed in second hand robes for the rest of his life was more than enough for Draco to keep his head up and defend his decision to anyone. He'd taken the only option available to him, and would continue to do so until he reached seventeen. Then he would be moving the entire Malfoy fortune elsewhere before seeking his revenge. This required an urgent letter home to his father.

Both heads of house returned to the staff table, content the matter had been resolved without breaking any school rules, while Harry sat back down to his interrupted breakfast. Hermione was reading Malfoy's discarded paper but had a question that the Prophet didn't answer.

"Gringotts actually have an official statement on the matter printed in the Prophet. It covers in detail everything you just said, including listing the conditions that are considered a breach of contract. Malfoy could have saved himself the embarrassment if he'd only finished reading. I suppose the 'Malfoy loses Vaults' headline was as far as he got. It doesn't mention though why his mother couldn't just move their valuables?"

Padma supplied the answer to her muggle born friend. "No head of a pureblood family would give his wife access to everything, probably too frightened they would be robbed blind."

Harry didn't know this, and it went against the information he did have. "My mum did, dad had her assigned full access to the Potter vaults. There were obviously things only the head of the Potter family could do, but those apart, everything was equal."

This intrigued both his friends though it was Padma who asked how he knew this.

"My father is the senior accounts manager at Gringotts, the Potter family account is the most senior at the bank. My father knew both my mum and dad, and liked them very much. He says I've got my mother's eyes."

"Your mum must have been beautiful..."

The words were out before it dawned on Hermione what she was saying. Padma was sitting watching both of them turn shades of pink and decided to help out, though she would tease Hermione mercilessly when she got her alone later. "Hey Harry, I think you could get Malfoy to clean our shoes for us. I think you could get Malfoy to do just about anything you wanted!"

"That is not the goblin way Padma."

"Maybe not, but you have to admit it would be funny..."

This cracked the three of them up.

Bill entered the great Hall to see three of his students laughing together, he couldn't help but compare them to his two youngest siblings. Ginny now sat enthralled as Bill told tales of the real Harry after dinner. He didn't want his sister simply switching her fantasy but was indulging Ginny at the moment. Watching Ron's face as he described what Harry had done to the nine older students was worth it. His mother and father had been on Ron's case all week and his youngest brother now couldn't wait to return to Hogwarts.

Taking the carrot and stick approach, Bill was using some of his extra salary to buy Ron a new wand later today. He also promised new robes if he finished all the homework Bill had gotten from Minerva for him. He wasn't entirely happy with having to coerce Ron into doing something but there weren't too many other options available at the moment. The youngest Weasley brother was in the last chance saloon as far as his Hogwarts education was concerned. Bill and Percy were taking on the task of ensuring Ron didn't blow it.

He could practically feel Dumbledore's eyes boring into his back while the Gringotts employe walked toward his students, Bill was certain the approach would be coming soon.

A/N Thanks for reading

## Chapter 11

The classroom door opened though most of the room's current occupants didn't notice they now had a visitor. Padma and Neville were practically dead on their feet, exhaustion clearly visible in their features. Hermione was certainly flushed and tired but Harry hardly looked out of breath. Bill was finishing their first lesson by hammering his point home. "The fitter you are, the longer you can last in a fight. It just may be the difference between getting away or being seriously hurt. That is why we will practice, practice, and practice again."

Hermione was breathing heavily, knackered from dodging spells and her repeated attempts to cast a strong shield - and she hadn't yet learned one spell to fight back with. She was flustered, sweaty and certainly not a happy young witch. "Professor Weasley, what if I just take out a gun and shoot the bad guy?"

It was Hermione's idea of a joke, thinking of her favourite scene from 'Raiders of the Lost Ark', but the person who'd just entered didn't take it as such. Dumbledore didn't think it was funny at all. "MISS GRANGER! Firearms are abhorrent to the magical community, anyone using one against a witch or wizard would see themselves shunned by magical society. They should never be used."

Hermione couldn't believe what she was hearing so asked the headmaster for clarification. "My father is a member of a shooting club, he could put a couple of bullets into you from one hundred yards away in the time it takes to cast a shield. Are you saying this is wrong?"

"I do not doubt your facts," Dumbledore said this in such a condescending manner that it was clear he didn't believe this feat was possible. "All I am saying is what would happen if you - a witch - were to use this abomination on someone else."

"And just who makes up these rules?" Hermione didn't wait for an answer but turned to Harry, wanting to hear the only opinion that mattered to her.

Harry's answer showed his inexperience with relationships, best friends or any other kind. "Goblins like to look their opponents in the eye before they kill them."



Hermione could actually feel the smugness radiating from Dumbledore, even though the headmaster was currently behind her. Her lip was trembling at what she perceived as Harry's betrayal. "I'll tell you what Harry, while you're looking into Voldemort's eyes, I'll shoot the mad bastard in the head. I don't care if no one ever speaks to me again, at least you will be alive. If you let others set the rules, you'll be dead - because Voldemort certainly won't let any stupid rules stop him getting what he wants."

With that, Hermione ran out the door in tears.

Harry looked to Neville for some clue as to what had just happened, his friend shrugged his shoulders as he had no help to offer. "Harry, I don't even know what a gun is?"

Padma just about managed to find enough breath to huff at Harry. "It doesn't matter what a gun is, she was right and you were wrong. Now get after Hermione and tell your best friend that - you moron!"

It was a worried Harry who shot out the room after Hermione.

Albus as usual was able to turn any situation to his advantage. "As it would appear your lesson is now over, could I have a private word with your professor?"

It might be a polite dismissal, but Padma and Neville still knew they were being dismissed.

Bill had already decided he wouldn't make any of this easy for the old man. He'd talked over with Barchoke the best way to handle this approach and they both agreed Dumbledore would expect to have to wear the Gringotts employee down - so that's what Albus was going to have to do. He decided to make it as awkward as possible right from the start. "It will have to be a quick word Albus, I have places to be and things to do this afternoon."

Albus hated having to rush these kind of discussions, where was the room for finesse in that? As William was currently putting on his cloak and getting ready to leave, he really had no other option. "You seem to enjoy teaching and I was wondering just how attached you were to working for the goblins?"

Bill just laughed, "Yes I enjoy tutoring but it is such a small part of my new position - not something I fancy doing full time. I would miss my other duties too much."

"Just what are these other duties? Perhaps we could find something similar to interest you within the castle?"

"Albus Dumbledore, you know I can't talk about that. Even more so with someone who's currently barred from Gringotts." Bill thought that was enough for a first encounter so bade a disappointed Dumbledore good day.

-oOoOo-

Hermione may have been training for just over a week now but Harry had been doing exercise routines for years, he quickly caught up with the upset young witch. "Hermione, you were right and I was wrong."

At that Hermione turned to face him. "What was I right about Harry?"

Panic flashed through him for a second before he fought it down. Panic led to mistakes and he couldn't afford to make one now. He gently took her hand and kissed the back of it while his mind worked out just what he was going to say. "I don't know anything about guns, and not much more about offensive spells, but you were right. I cannot let outside forces determine the rules of a fight, because there are no rules in a fight."

Hermione almost managed a smile. "That's all I was trying to say Harry. Guns might not be the answer, but we shouldn't just dismiss anything out of hand. You have been trained to use a blade, and appear expert with it. I don't think I could use that method on someone. If it was to save my parents or my friends though, I think I could use a gun. I'm pretty sure I could've pulled a trigger to shoot that troll in the infirmary. It's a cultural difference Harry, something to be worked out - not dismissed as irrelevant."

He was beginning to understand what his best friend was meaning. "The muggle way would be guns, the goblins would use a blade up close while wizards would stand and fire curses at each other. What you're saying is that I should rule nothing out?"

Hermione now flung her arms around him and held Harry close. "You said you've got to fight him but I don't want you to - I just want the bastard dead and you alive. No chivalry, no duels at dawn, you can look him in the eyes after you've killed him - sneak up behind and cut his head off. You gave that troll every chance before being forced to kill it. Don't give Voldemort a chance - because he won't give you one."

She was crying while holding him tight, Harry's arms around Hermione gave her the courage to say what was on her mind. "I've never had a best friend before Harry so I don't know if what we have is normal or not. What I do know is that I never want to lose this - ever! Between deranged dark lords and every witch under the age of twenty five wanting a piece of you, I feel I'm going to get left behind..."

Hermione was suddenly experiencing blood flow issues as Harry's arms held her even tighter, that wizard didn't know his own strength. His words though pumped joy to every part of her body.

"I will never abandon you Hermione. As far as I am concerned, we will be best friends forever."

He then buried his head in her bushy hair as she whispered "Best friends forever" in his ear. Hermione was giddy - whether from happiness or lack of oxygen to the brain she didn't really care at this point.

A droll voice she had come to know so well spoiled this perfect moment. "Eh Harry, judging by the colour of her face, Hermione really needs to take a deep breathe about now. I also think you should let her feet touch the floor again."

It wasn't until Harry's grip slackened that Hermione realised he'd lifted her off the ground, Harry really didn't know his own strength.

"I'm sorry Hermione, I guess I got carried away..."

She gave him a grade one new improved version smile. "It's fine Harry, I'm sorry too for causing this..."

Padma's droll voice once more interrupted. "Are you sorry for swearing in front of the headmaster? Certainly impressed the hell out of me."

"What! Oh my, do you think I'll get detention - should I apologise?"

This had been a major clue to Harry that his best friend was really upset - he'd never heard Hermione swear before. "I think you should get house points for saying you wanted that mad bastard Voldemort dead."

Neville glanced nervously at his two friends. "So are you two okay again?" Nods saw him continuing, "Sorry I wasn't much help Harry..."

"That's okay Neville - two clueless males here. Just as well we've got Padma and Hermione to keep us right."

"...And don't you forget it Crow. See Hermione, I knew the hat put him in Ravenclaw for a reason."

"I don't know why it put me in Gryffindor? I was rubbish at defence today."

"You'll get it Neville, Hermione and I have been training in the morning - it definitely helps."

"I don't care how much it helps, I am not getting up at ridiculous hours to go running - and certainly not wearing anything like Hermione dresses in to do so. My father would cast me out the family for even mentioning clothes like that." The pink tinges both her friends managed was another victory for Padma, and helped with taking their minds of why they were fighting in the first place. Everyone though decided it would be a good idea to have a shower before heading down to lunch.

-oOoOo-

At breakfast on Monday, the headmaster introduced the new Defence against the Dark Arts professor. Professor Keegan was a small, mousy man with receding grey hair and a developing paunch. He stood and nervously acknowledged the students as Dumbledore introduced him. The wizard appeared terrified of his own shadow but

at least wasn't wearing a turban. Penelope had told the first years that Hogwarts defence teachers had gotten progressively worse every year she'd been here. Professor Keegan didn't seem capable of bucking that trend.

The Ravenclaw first years were now all looking toward Harry, and he didn't disappoint. "Curse-breaker Weasley will still be tutoring me at our normal time for defence. The rest of first year are welcome to join those lessons."

He didn't say any more, too engrossed in the letter Eargit had delivered. Hermione noticed the amount of concentration Harry was affording the parchment in his hands and asked the obvious. "Anything wrong Harry?"

"Oh I think father is being sneaky, I'll know more after speaking with Curse-breaker Weasley." He could see Hermione already beginning to fret that something was wrong so decided to tell her now.

"Every Halloween, while the wizarding community celebrate, my father and I have a little family ritual that we do. The reason I loathe being referred to as the boy-who-lived is because that stupid title only tells half the story. People tend to forget what else happened that night, my mum and dad were murdered."

Hermione instinctively reached for her best friend's hand, offering comfort for Harry while wondering just what this ritual was. She soon found out.

"My father takes me to the cemetery where my mum and dad are buried and we spend a few hours there, I sit and tell them everything that's happened to me since the last time we talked. Father has asked me if I want to invite you along this year."

Hermione was overwhelmed at this development but needed to be sure Harry wanted her there. She couldn't think of anything more personal than this. "What do you think Harry? You said it had become a family ritual, do you want someone else there?"

"Hermione, I would love you to be there beside me. I want to introduce my mum and dad to my best friend. I just think my father is being sneaky about it."

"This must be some goblin thing I don't understand Harry, so you're going to have to explain that."

Harry squeezed her hand and told her part of the truth. "To get out of the castle for the day, you need a parental permission slip. I think my father will be contacting your mum and dad the minute I say yes. I also have a sneaky suspicion that the subject of guns will find its way into whatever conversation they have."

"Oh Harry, that's brilliant."

"I wrote to my father expressing your opinion that this shouldn't be a fight, it would seem he agrees with you. I just hope he doesn't frighten your parents off."

Again Hermione was confused, she was getting used to it though from hanging around with Harry. "You lost me again Harry."

"Have you told your parents that your best friend has a powerful psychotic nutter trying to kill him? If they are as smart as you, they'll grab their daughter and head for the hills. Getting you as far away from danger as possible would definitely be the smart move. I certainly wouldn't blame them if they did..."

"Well I bloody would..." this was said loud enough to attract attention, causing Padma to run interference for them. She started chatting to Terry about their herbology homework and soon had dragged another two first years into the discussion.

Hermione lowered her voice so anyone other than Harry would have trouble hearing what she was saying. "My parents know I was in the infirmary when that troll paid a visit, they also know who saved me. I've described in great detail how you and Padma stood up for their daughter when those girls ganged up on me - we both know Neville would have been beside us too if he'd known. My mum is over the moon that I have friends now who would do that for me. That I'm exercising and taking extra lessons on how to defend myself has my dad pretty chuffed too."

Hermione hung her head as she said the next part. "That was not the first time I had been faced with a group of bullies, it was the first time I had friends rushing to help me. My parents knew my main hope for Hogwarts was to make some friends, and that I've

managed to do that. I've never been happier and they will certainly not drag me out the castle because your father speaks to them about guns."

Harry had to hope Hermione would be a decent judge of her parents' reactions, what really worried him was just how much his father would reveal. They had plans for after their visit to the graveyard this Halloween, one of which Hermione certainly couldn't accompany them on. Just what was his father up to?

Their trip down to herbology allowed the rest of first year to hear the news that they could continue the defence lessons with Professor Weasley. Malfoy immediately but politely declined the offer, being quickly followed by Crabb, Goyle and Parkinson.

Ron didn't need to withdraw, he was never included in the first place. Ron had returned to the castle with his new wand tucked away in the pocket of his new robes. His mum and dad had badgered and harried their youngest son every chance they could while he'd been home. With Ginny not talking to him because he tried to attack her hero, it had been a pretty dismal time for the youngest male Weasley at the Burrow. That his mother also forbade him any second helpings - and stopped all his 'snacks' - left the young Gryffindor desperate to get back to Hogwarts. Breakfast was enough to tell him his problem still existed though, namely no seconds.

His father had been so angry and had actually went mental at him for the first time in Ron's short life. His dad's temper appeared to be driven not only by the fact his son had fired those curses, but also that Ron hadn't apologised afterwards. His father had laid down the law - apologise by Saturday or he would be getting dragged back to the Burrow by Bill on Sunday. He would have to chose his moment carefully, there were all different definitions of 'public' and Ron intended to do the deed with as few people there as possible.

-oOoOo-

After talking to his defence tutor, Harry was ready to kick himself. Only his need to conceal the package he'd just been slipped stopped him. Of course his father would have to contact the Grangers over Harry's immediate plans, the rest had just followed from there. Curse-breaker Weasley had already contacted

Hermione's parents, and Harry was delighted they had said yes to his idea.

Bill was contacting them again on Thursday and would now arrange a meeting between the Grangers and his father to discuss Hermione's participation in their plans for Halloween. Now all Harry had to do was keep a secret from Hermione for a few days - easier said than done.

-oOoOo-

Hermione had noticed a change in her best friend over the last few days, it may be subtle but it was there. There was nothing subtle about tonight though, all through their astronomy lesson Harry had been like a little kid on Christmas Eve. Professor Sinistra had barely dismissed them when Hermione dragged Harry over to a quiet spot of the astronomy tower to demand some answers.

"Okay Crow - spill it. I want to know what's going on."

Harry's wide smile at this may have been confusing but his next action just blew her socks off. He leaned in and kissed her. It was only on the cheek but it was from Harry, it was her first kiss and they were under the moonlight. It was only when he spoke that she got a grip and realised just what had been going on.

"Happy Birthday Hermione!"

Realising that it was now well past midnight, it hit Hermione that she had just turned twelve. "How did you know?"

"It's my duty as a best friend to know when your birthday is, I'll bet you know mine?"

"Harry, the entire castle knows when yours is, I'm surprised it isn't a public holiday..."

Hermione was stopped from saying any more when Harry pressed the present Bill had slipped him into Hermione's hands. It was an exquisite inlaid and lacquered wooden box that measured about eight inches by two, though wasn't even an inch thick. She opened what she guessed was a jewellery case, only to snap the lid closed after barely a glance. "Harry - oh shit Harry - this is way, way too



much. It's only my birthday! This is birthday, Christmas, Easter and anything else you can think of for the next decade."

Harry's smile never wavered as he opened the box and took out what was inside. "What we have here is a cultural difference Hermione. Goblins don't celebrate Christmas, Easter or any other wizarding holidays, so nothing is more important to us than someone's birthday."

This news rocked Hermione back on her heels. "You don't celebrate Christmas Harry?"

Padma and Neville had hung back to give their friends a moment, having been in on Harry's plan. Both had gifts for Hermione that they would give her tomorrow. Padma knew how excited Harry had been about this and didn't want her friend getting sidetrack and disappoint him.

"Hermione, the Patil family doesn't celebrate Christmas either. As Harry said, it's a cultural thing. Now stop going off at a tangent and show me what Harry got you, he wouldn't even give us a clue."

While this had been going on, Harry had used the time to fasten the bracelet around Hermione's wrist. Her first glance at it in the box had told the birthday witch Harry's gift was beautiful, seeing it on her wrist changed that opinion. Beautiful just didn't do this work of art justice.

The bracelet was made from gold yet of a design she'd never seen before. There were five gold disks that had tiny sapphires around their edges. These disks were encased in a filigree design that would have all other goldsmiths weeping with envy, before taking up lumberjacking. Compared to this, they might as well have been practicing their trade using axes.

Two of the disks had engravings on them that Hermione didn't recognise, the other three though had her heart doing backflips in her chest. The one on the left proclaimed HARRY while the right one was engraved with her own name. It was the one in the middle of these two that had tears of joy slowly running down her cheeks, it announced to anyone glancing at her wrist that they would be BEST FRIENDS FOREVER.

Padma's hands shot to her face the instant she laid eyes on Harry's gift. "Oh Merlin's hairy left buttock! Hermione, that's goblin made jewellery."

Hermione thought that would be obvious, since it was a gift from Harry. She didn't understand the emphasis Padma was placing on its manufacturers.

Neville was happy that for once he could supply his friends with some answers. "Hermione, the goblins are world renowned metal smiths. They not only make fantastic blades, they have no equal when it comes to making jewellery. What makes it even more sought after is that they hardly ever let any of it fall into wizards or witches hands. The Longbottom family has one item that has been passed down the family for hundreds of years."

Padma was nodding like a lunatic, unable to take her eyes off the bracelet her friend had on her wrist. "Hermione, you'll start a riot when you walk into the great hall wearing that tomorrow. Please make sure that bitch Chambers gets a good eyeful of it."

"This is too fine to wear everyday..."

Harry interrupted the birthday witch. "Hermione, I want you to promise you'll never take that off. It contains protective runes carved into two of the disks. Just by being in contact with your skin, the bracelet generates enough protective power that it would easily have deflected both the curses you were hit with last week."

"Oh shit, shit, shit - enchanted goblin jewellery! Hermione, when anyone asks - just say it was a gift from Harry and act dumb about everything else. Trust me on this, your bracelet is worth its own front page headline in the Prophet."

Neville agreed with Padma. "Goblin jewellery is extremely rare, your bracelet though might be the only piece of enchanted goblin jewellery not owned by a goblin."

All eyes were now on Harry, he chose Hermione's arm that he had placed the bracelet and brought the back of her hand to his lips. "It says right there that we will be best friends forever - that to me is priceless. Happy Birthday Hermione." Harry then kissed the back of Hermione's hand and had the birthday witch practically swooning.

"Now I hate to ruin this moment, but if we don't get a move on we could be spending your birthday in detention. Everyone else has left."

Professor Sinistra emerged from the darkness, loath to break up the cutest thing she'd ever seen. She could hardly wait to tell Minerva in the morning. Aurora agreed with Miss Patil though, and would not be mentioning that Miss Granger's bracelet was enchanted.

"Not quite everyone has left Mr Crow, Happy Birthday Miss Granger. Now I will escort you four to your houses, just to ensure no one gets detention on such a special day."

Harry held out his arm for Hermione and all four followed the astronomy professor. Hermione though took a moment to kiss Harry on the cheek. "Thank you Harry, its absolutely gorgeous and I love it." Both may have been blushing as they made their way along the corridor but their wide smiles could practically light their way back to Ravenclaw tower.

-oOoOo-

Padma gave Hermione her present before they went down to get Harry for breakfast. It was fun to watch her friend's face change colours as she read the title of the book - Twelve fail-safe ways to woo your wizard. When Hermione started displaying purple tints in her colour scheme, Padma lost her battle with laughter and handed over her friend's real present. It was still a book, though Hermione appeared to appreciate 'a score of offensive spells to even the score' far better than her first offering.

Padma was behind her friends as they walked into the great hall and was pleased to see her prediction was coming true. Hermione's hand was, as usual, through Harry's arm. This appeared to be the perfect angle for the sapphires of her bracelet to catch the light and sparkle.

Padma thought young witches possessed skills for sniffing out shiny, sparkly things that would rival any niffler. When those shiny, sparkly things were worn by another young witch, the poor little niffler might as well stay in its burrow because it became a no-contest. There were students in the great hall who couldn't read instructions off the

blackboards in classrooms yet could tell you what Hermione Granger's bracelet said.

When Neville approached the Ravenclaw table with a gift for Hermione, the Knut dropped that it was her birthday. She was delighted with her new book on noble houses and their customs. A red-faced Neville was eventually persuaded to sit beside the trio, but not before Hermione had hugged him and kissed her friend on the cheek in thanks.

As usual, Roger had watched the by-play between the friends. He also couldn't help but notice every witch at the table staring at Hermione's birthday present. "Hell Crow, you're making the rest of us guys look bad here. Just how are we meant to match that?"

Harry really liked Roger's joking nature, and answered right back in the same vein. "Well Davies, I don't see what's wrong with letting everyone know I have a great best friend."

The entire table heard the humour in his voice, they also understood there was steel underlying that humour.

A newly returned Andrews sat at the other end of the table, head down and not looking or talking to anyone. Her parents had been livid when they heard what happened, her father was all for contacting the parents of the other girls involved to arrange some collective action against this upstart who'd harmed their children. The Prophet had changed everyone's views, or rather their report on what happened to the Malfoys did.

The purebloods were learning a variation on the golden rule - those that HAVE your gold make the rules!

Few, if any, felt secure enough in their own wards to trust having their fortunes stored at home. There was also the added problem of those witches and wizards with access to their home. Gringotts protected fortunes not only from robbers but those family members who would think a share of said fortune should rightly be theirs. It was easy for the Gringotts account holder to define exactly who could do what to their vault - telling your brother / mother / greedy in-laws / obnoxious cousins that they weren't welcome in your house had far more significant ramifications. All sniggering at Draco's respectful behaviour soon stopped as pureblood after pureblood

received the same message from home - do not antagonise Harry Crow.

Minerva sat at the staff table and watched over her charges. Her eyes usually focused mostly on her lion cubs but she found her gaze more and more being drawn to the Ravenclaw trio. Mr Longbottom's acceptance into this group was also very pleasing. Augusta tended to wrap young Neville in cotton wool, making good friends was exactly what the young lad needed.

The deputy headmistress couldn't help but think young Harry was surrounding himself with good people. She approved wholeheartedly of his close friends and Master Pitslay had impressed the hell out of her. William Weasley was in her unbiased opinion, one of the finest young wizards to have come through Hogwarts in a long time.

Her correspondence with Barchoke was also refreshing. His entire aims were centred around what was best for his son, and he was more than prepared to back that up with gold when needed. She'd listened with great interest to the tale of what had happened after their astronomy class last night and was finding her opinion of Harry matching Pomona's. He may be the son of James Potter but he had none of the faults his biological father had at the same age. Now if only Severus could get his head out his arse and see the boy was far more like Lily than James, they may be able to avert a confrontation that couldn't end well.

-oOoOo-

When Professor Weasley asked them both to wait behind, Hermione started to run through the entire lesson in her mind to discover what she'd done wrong. Bill played along with her fears at the start.

"Miss Granger, you can thank your best friend for your current predicament." His wide smile would have half the witches in the castle dropping at his feet, Hermione was just pleased this meant she wasn't in trouble with a professor. "Your mum and dad wanted me to wish you a Happy Birthday, oh and give you this."

Hermione was so touched by this, she didn't notice Harry moving behind the professor's desk. "How was Harry responsible for you seeing my parents?"

It was Harry who answered her. "Well, it was actually my father. When he discovered what I wanted to get you for your birthday, he realised I needed your parents' permission first."

Hermione was beginning to wonder if this was a goblin thing again, did giving someone a bracelet signify something more in there culture? That was until she saw what Harry had in his hands.

"Happy Birthday Hermione. I didn't name him yet, figuring I would leave that up to you."

Harry gently placed a fluffy black kitten into her hands, Hermione fell in love with her new pet instantly. "Oh Harry, he's simply gorgeous. With that goblin sense of humour of yours, the poor thing would probably be saddled with a name like snowball."

Harry couldn't help but smile at his best friend's reaction to his gift. "Actually, I was thinking more along the terms of Moonlight. Without that light, he would be practically invisible."

Hermione had a different memory to associate with Harry's suggestion, it reminded the young witch that her first kiss had been under moonlight on her birthday. She also had to admit that his suggestion was so much better than Blackie - which was the first thing that came into her head. "Okay, so Moonlight it is. Harry, you're spoiling me."

"Hermione, you only turn twelve once in your life - why shouldn't that be celebrated?"

Harry picked up her present from home and offered his arm, he'd heard something outside that had him wanting to leave now. If that prat attempted to spoil Hermione's birthday, there would be hell to pay.

Hermione had Moonlight cradled in one arm, while her other was linked with Harry. She had been fretting about spending her first birthday away from home, but this year she had friends to share it with. Hermione thought this was already her best birthday ever.

Ron was walking back from his defence lesson when he spotted the Patil bint standing outside a classroom with Neville. He didn't think there could be a better opportunity for a 'public' apology than this.

"Miss Patil, I would like to apologise for hitting you with that curse. It was purely accidental as you were never my intended target."

Padma's gaze hardened as she stared Ron down, the Ravenclaw witch well remembered the taste of slugs, and what getting cursed had led to in the infirmary. Padma had no intention of giving this Weasley an easy out. "What about Hermione, the girl you intended the curse to hit?"

Ron's temper momentarily flared but he managed to get control of it, why couldn't this bint just say she accepts and get this over with? "I intend to apologise to Miss Granger too."

She nodded at that. "If Hermione accepts your apology, I will too."

Neville couldn't help but prod the prat. "This is your lucky day Ron, Hermione will be coming right out that door any minute."

Before Ron had time to bolt, he was suddenly faced with Crow and Granger. With retreat no longer an option, he was forced to behave like a Gryffindor. "Miss Granger, I would like to apologise for firing a curse at you."

Hermione didn't think this day could hold any more surprises but had just been proved wrong. Padma's slight nod gave her the information she was looking for. She hadn't actually been hit with the curse but at least the idiot had apologised to Padma, there was still one thing missing though. "What about Harry, isn't he due an apology too?"

This was a step too far for Ron. "What for? It was me who ended up in the infirmary..."

The growl stopped Ron's rant in its tracks. A furious Bill was standing behind Crow and Granger, glaring right at him - Ron needed no further prompting. "Mr Crow, I would like to apologise for attempting to curse you."

Harry genuinely liked three of the Weasley brothers, and it was Hermione's birthday. "Apology accepted."

The two girls quickly followed Harry's lead as Bill handed Neville the cat basket and supplies Harry had forgotten about in his haste to leave the room. As the four friends made their way along the corridor, Bill dragged his youngest brother into the classroom by his new robes.

"I want a word with you Ronnie!"

A/N thanks for reading

A/N 2 thanks to RobC for his variation on the golden rule. His review made me laugh so I used it in this chapter.



## Chapter 12

There were six first year Ravenclaws whose emotions were flying high as kites. Lunch sat forgotten as they described their first potions lesson in great detail, while showing anyone who was even remotely interested their new book. Since this was the Ravenclaw table, 'anyone who was even remotely interested' meant the entire house - and they all wanted to know where they could get their hands on a potions book like that. Not quite the entire house though, three first years - and a Gryffindor interloper - were quietly studying books of a different sort.

They were drawn out of their intensive studying by a pair of voices.

"Quidditch through the ages?"

"The Noble sport of Warlocks?"

"He flew like a madman?"

"Do our eyes deceive us George or are these four swotting up for their flying lesson today?"

"Oh I think it's worse than that Fred, the Order of the Aves appear to be afraid of flying."

"Perhaps we should have named this one penguin, what do you think Robin?"

'Robin' was swift to kick this pair of joker's assumptions right back at them. "The only time my gran would let me out of her sight was when I was in the greenhouses, she wouldn't even allow a broom in the manor."

Hermione quickly rallied to support her friend against the redheaded dynamic duo, citing her own circumstances. "I didn't know magic was real until I got my letter, how was I supposed to practice flying on a broom?"

Harry was right behind them in defending the group's right to be nervous. "Goblins live underground, not much scope for flying there unless you're a bat. We tend to use brooms for sweeping."

An entirely different outlook on the matter was provided by Padma. "I was raised with flying carpets, I imagine brooms will be sore on your bum. Given the choice, I'll take a bit of Persian rug under me any day."

All eyes were now on Padma. "What? It's only Europe that bans flying carpets, and the riddle of why that's the case is easily solved. It was only because the broom manufacturers pushed for it, they didn't want the competition. Before we moved to Britain, we had a much-loved carpet that we traveled around the country on. We used to have family picnics while traveling, try doing that on a broom."

This idea appealed to Hermione. "I think I would like that much better than a broom, you could even fit seat-belts."

Neville didn't know exactly what a seat-belt was but grasped the general concept. "I like the sound of being strapped-in. It's not so much the flying that bothers me, more the falling from a great height."

"Wait until you see your first quidditch match."

"Yeah, Fred and I are the Gryffindor beaters."

Both twins were very proud of this achievement but Miss Granger wasn't too impressed. Harry and Hermione had been sharing 'Quidditch through the Ages' so she at least knew what a beater was. "So you two beat these bludger things at other players to try and knock them off their brooms? And this is the most popular sport..."

Harry cut her off before she could say any more. "Cultural differences Hermione, let's at least wait until we've seen a match before saying any more."

"You're right Harry, the reasons behind why people play golf also escape me." The blank looks encouraged Hermione to explain. "They use clubs to hit this little white ball into a small hole in the grass that can be a couple of hundred yards away."

They waited for more before George asked the obvious. "What happens after they get the ball in the hole?"

"Oh, they pick it out and move on to the next hole..."

The twins riotous laughter caught everyone's attention. "Oh Fred, they're good!"

"Yes oh brother of mine, lesser wizards would have been sucked right in to their ploy -whatever it was..."

"...but not the Weasley twins. Your delivery was perfect Hermione, a beautiful mixture of annoyed innocence."

"Yeah, it was just your final part that let you down. You need to invent something a bit more believable than that goof game if you really want to hook people. Apart from that, your prank was excellent."

"We just stepped over here to say thanks for forgiving Ron and you try to catch us out - you guys are brilliant!"

The twins walked away laughing while the rest of their house studied these people who were brave enough to take on the Weasley twins.

Harry had some words of advice. "Cultural differences Hermione, and shut-it Roger."

-oOoOo-

Barchoke stood to welcome the Grangers to his office. "I am Barchoke, Senior Accounts Manager at Gringotts - and Harry's father. I would like to thank you both for coming here today, especially since I know you are very busy."

"Oh it was no trouble, in fact I really enjoyed the method of transport your young Mr Weasley used to get us here - a portkey I believe he called it? He's using something similar to take him all the way to Scotland now, to give the kids their extra defence lessons."

Dan smiled and offered his hand. "Hi, I'm Dan Granger, and this is my better half Emma. Please excuse my wife, she gets rather excited by all this magic. We got a letter from Hermione this morning telling us that the kids flew on brooms yesterday, I think that's enough to get any parent excited."

Barchoke shook the offered hand, before doing the same with Emma. They'd barely been in his office a minute yet already showed more courtesy than wizards he'd been dealing with for years.

Dan had a question that he wanted answered before they went any further. "Can I ask if this meeting is with a senior banking official or the father of our Hermione's best friend?"

He was already liking these people and invited them to sit before answering. "I've worked my entire life to get where I am inside Gringotts, something I'm proud of. Nothing gives me more pride and pleasure though than being known as Harry's father, that is who you are speaking with today."

Emma was delighted with this news. "I really want to thank your son for making Hermione's time at Hogwarts such a happy experience - especially his actions with those bullies. That had happened before at her primary school and it was left to Dan and I to go down there after the event."

"Ma'am, I feel it is I who must thank your daughter. I watched my son grow up in a world that was not his own and worried over how Harry would adapt to Hogwarts. He has led a very lonely childhood, throwing himself into his studies to compensate for the lack of close friends. Harry and your daughter met on the express and were like two kindred spirits, they have been inseparable since. I have had the pleasure of taking lunch in their company. In my humble opinion, they bring out the best in each other."

Hearing this had Emma beaming but Dan had his practical hat on, this was a goblin-sent opportunity to get some answers. "Barchoke, I hope you don't mind me asking, but some of the things in Hermione's letters are confusing to us. The Crow / Potter duel-identity is hard enough to understand, never mind the goblin / wizard issue, but we don't know where to start with the whole 'Hogwarts Champion' thing. I find it hard to believe the school lets a first year walk around with a sword, though I will be eternally grateful that they do."

Barchoke offered tea, saying this could take some time. He was slowly becoming aware this couple would now play a part in Harry's life. With Harry and their daughter being practically joined at the hip, there simply was no other alternative. He told them the entire tale in

chronological order, starting with a dark lord hearing a prophecy before trying to kill a baby. No matter how many times he told the story of Harry's relatives not wanting the boy, he was never able to fully hide his anger at the deed. The goblin was delighted to see that anger shared by these loving parents.

He rounded the story off with a blow by blow account of the troll incident - including who had released the creature into the castle and why.

The Grangers had heard most of the details from Hermione, it was just hearing how it all fitted together that knocked them back a bit. Dan was the first to recover, and showed he really understood the problem. "Can I assume you know why this guy won't stay dead?"

"Yes, sorry but the method he used must remain a secret for now. You have my word though that we are doing everything in our power to ensure this creature will soon stay permanently dead."

This talk of death sent a shiver down Emma so she pressed ahead with what she wanted to ask from the minute she'd stepped into Barchoke's office. "Please don't think me forward, you've actually met Hermione while we've only read about Harry. Do you have a picture we could see?"

Asking any proud parent to see a picture of their child will always get a yes. Barchoke moved behind his desk and removed a framed picture from a concealed drawer. "This was taken the morning he left for Hogwarts."

Emma was presented with Harry in his 'Mr Darcy' guise and an "Oh My" escaped her lips before she had time to engage her brain.

Emma had no difficulty in thinking of Harry and Hermione as kindred spirits. Barchoke's description of his son having no close friends and throwing himself into his studies was scarily familiar to both Grangers. Hermione had supplied some of the details of her journey to Scotland, with what she'd heard here today Emma could now fill in the blanks. Two lonely children reaching out to each other as they shared a compartment for hours, arriving at Hogwarts as each other's first friend. Hermione had said she didn't know what made her ask Harry if he wanted to share that compartment, one glance at

the picture was enough for her mother to know the answer. Her little girl was smitten.

She passed the picture over to her husband. "Your son is a very handsome young man, I mean wizard - oh goblin. I'm sorry, perhaps you can see why this is so confusing for us."

Barchoke actually laughed. "Ma'am, I was happy with handsome."

"Hermione mentioned getting out of school for a day to accompany Harry on some family event, she said we needed to sign a permission form?"

Opening up a folder, Barchoke handed the correct form to Emma. Dan though had caught a glimpse of a lot more paperwork with their name on it. "Can I ask what else you have in that folder?"

Barchoke handed the entire folder to Dan before beginning to explain exactly why he needed that folder. "My son has many people who seem determined to play a part in his life, your daughter has already suffered because of this and I can only sincerely apologise."

"Can I assume that is why Hermione was given this bracelet she's been raving about? We thought Harry was getting her a kitten for her birthday, not both. I'll be honest with you Barchoke, while I really like the protection angle, the father in me isn't sure how to handle my twelve year old daughter receiving jewellery even she classed as 'ridiculously expensive' - especially from a young lad we've never met."

"The kneazle kitten was indeed earmarked as Hermione's present, but seeing his best friend attacked affected Harry deeply. He wanted her protected, and knew we possessed the means to do so."

Dan and Emma both expressed their agreement and gratitude at that while Barchoke explained the 'ridiculously expensive' part.

"There is a phenomenon that we goblins neither understand nor can control, why wizards and even muggles will pay ludicrous amounts to own something no one else has. Take a piece of canvas, slap some paint on it and you may end up with a nice picture. Depending who slapped that paint on, the picture might be worth hundreds,

thousands or millions. Our goldsmiths have a reputation for being the very best at what they do. Since we rarely allow our jewellery to pass out of goblin hands, the wizards will pay ludicrous amounts for it."

"I think I see what you are saying, something is only worth whatever value people are prepared to pay for it."

"Exactly Emma. James and Lily Potter set up a trust fund for their son attending Hogwarts. Buying that bracelet as a goblin barely put a dent in that fund, there wouldn't have been enough gold in that trust vault for a wizard to buy the same item."

It was a confused Dan who asked what seemed a glaringly obvious question. "With such a lucrative market, why is there not more jewellery being sold?"

"That would never work, due to the way we goblins are possessive about the items we make. Special permission from the Director is needed before an item can pass to someone who is not a goblin, that signed permission is contained in the folder in front of you. This permission comes with some pretty restrictive conditions. The worse one being, should the person gifted the item ever decide to sell it, the giver is duty bound to repurchase the item - almost certainly at the far higher prices those outside Gringotts would pay. Since the giver must have these funds available before permission is granted, it is perhaps understandable that this is a very rare occurrence."

Dan thought he'd picked up on an inconsistency. "I thought you said Harry wouldn't be able to afford that bracelet at wizard prices?"

He was answered by a smiling Barchoke. "I said his trust fund didn't hold enough, that is a mere drop in the ocean of the Potter wealth."

"Oh dear, I hope all this talk of money doesn't make what we wanted to ask seem mercenary now. Hermione wrote that Harry didn't celebrate Christmas, we wanted to invite him to spend Christmas with us this year." Emma was fretting until she saw the wide grin now being displayed by the goblin.

"I'm sure Harry would love to spend the time with Hermione, and it fits perfectly with what I was moving onto next. One of the things I would like to see accomplished this Halloween is the warding of your

home, that's what most of the parchment in that folder is concerned with. As you know, your daughter currently wears a bracelet that offers her some protection against attack. These wards will perform the same function for your house and its occupants."

This had both Grangers more than a little concerned, Dan was first to voice his. "Do you really think that is necessary, are we really in danger?"

"No one ever thinks their home will be robbed, flooded or engulfed by flames. That doesn't mean a homeowner shouldn't take sensible precautions to prevent all of these from happening. That is all we are doing here, and you inviting Harry for Christmas allows the Potter account to pay for it."

"We're more than willing to pay any financial cost involved in protecting our home..."

The goblin politely interrupted. "Sorry Dan, for you as a non-magical to be able to afford this warding scheme, you would probably need to sell your house. By inviting Harry to stay, we can now ward your home as a goblin dwelling - drastically cutting the cost and circumventing any ministerial interference in the process. James and Lily Potter gave their lives to protect their son, they would gladly spend a bit of gold to ensure his continued safety - and that of his best friend's family."

Emma had noticed something and couldn't help but raise the matter. "You seem to switch Harry from goblin to wizard as the situation suits, rather like having dual nationality."

"My son had mentioned that Hermione was very smart, it's now easy to see where that comes from. We hope Harry can benefit from this dual nationality at least until he turns seventeen - then he must choose. The magical community are desperate for Harry to choose them, for the boy-who-lived to do otherwise would be unthinkable. We intend to exploit this 'desperation' to see some wrongs righted." Barchoke knew he had reached a crossroads, this was where he must decide just how much to tell these people.

"Desperate people can sometimes do foolish things to get what they want. As they look around for ways to influence my son's decision, sooner or later their gaze will rest upon your daughter. They may



have known each other less than a month but it is already clear to me that Miss Hermione Granger will be part of my son's life for many years to come. Having met your daughter, I can't tell you how delighted I am by that. I am assuming you will have gathered somewhat the same information from her letters home?"

Emma was enthusiastically adding her agreement. "We had to read her first letter home several times. The handwriting was the same but the letter appeared to have been written by a different girl. I've never known her to be so happy, it's Harry this and Harry that. She does mention other friends - Padma and Neville."

"I had the pleasure of lunching with all of them, the four are becoming close friends. The witches at Hogwarts have already recognised how close Harry and Hermione are, hence the bullying of your daughter. The purebloods are bound to have picked up on this already, this being the reason I want your home protected." The Grangers' blank looks led to them learning about blood status from a goblin.

"So Hermione was attacked because they thought my daughter wasn't good enough for your son?" Dan was understandably enraged at that.

Barchoke did his best to pacify the father's justifiable ire. "Not by either my son or I, of that I can assure you. Hermione is the same blood status as Harry's mother, and those very same purebloods class goblins as beasts. Useful beasts to be sure but nevertheless still mere creatures. You will find no support for this blood purity nonsense inside Gringotts."

"I find it a little convenient that none of this was mentioned before we signed Hermione up for Hogwarts."

This comment from Dan drew an answering wry smile from Barchoke, though on a goblin it could be mistaken for a grimace. "The last person I heard express sentiments like those was Lily Evans, just after she had become engaged to James Potter. I think the phrase being banded about at the time was that Lily was nothing more than an uppity mudblood trying to better herself. It saddens me to think of how much was sacrificed yet so little actually changed. We intend to use the ministry's desperation to implement some changes, another reason I want you and your daughter protected."

He tried to pass on the gravity of the situation to the parents. "Please don't mention any of this to Hermione in your letters, you will see her and Harry on Halloween where a fuller explanation can be given to both. Harry will shortly begin using the press in an attempt to achieve our aims. Since your daughter never leaves his side, this will probably drag her into the spotlight too. The wards we wish to erect will ban entry to all wizards and witches except those specifically allowed. At the moment, that would be Hermione, Harry and Curse-breaker Weasley. Anyone else attempting unauthorised entry will be rebuffed - and set off alarms that will see us rushing to your aid."

The last thing Barchoke wanted to do here was scare these people, and this was a lot for a pair of muggles to absorb in one morning. "We don't need a decision on this today, and I must emphasise this is purely a precautionary measure. Wards and such are common practice around magical buildings, Gringotts is positively bristling with them. I don't expect any attack on your home but it would seem sensible to take some precautions. We goblins spend our lives protecting precious items, but nothing is more precious to us than our children."

Both Grangers shared a moment of thought before Dan answered. "I really don't see how we can refuse such a generous offer, and can't wait to see the kids at Halloween. We knew it was going to be difficult being separated from Hermione but had sorely underestimated just how much we would miss her. Only her letters practically glowing with happiness convinced us we have made the right decision."

Emma agreed with every word her husband had just said although she had a few questions of her own that she wanted answered. "You said you think that our children would be part of each other's lives for years to come. Since they will be spending the next seven years together at Hogwarts, I think this view is perfectly understandable. I would like to know what happens when Harry turns seventeen? Will his choices effect their friendship?"

"Harry will have a massive decision to make, and to be honest I have no idea what he will choose. All I can do as a father is give my son a good view of all sides to help him reach whatever decision is best for him. That is one of the reasons I was delighted you invited

him into your home for the holidays, I want Harry to know there is a world out there beyond Gringotts and even beyond magic."

Barchoke then answered Emma's main concern as honestly as he could. "Young as they are, already I can't see Harry making any decision that permanently parts him from your daughter. Abandoning his best friend is something my son would never do, that's just not in his make-up. Charging through the school with his sword drawn in an attempt to keep her safe is far more in keeping with Harry's nature."

Both Granger parents were pleased to hear this, Hermione's letters home had shocked them with how attached she'd become to this boy in such a short space of time. They were delighted with the opportunity to see their daughter at Halloween, but even more so for the early opportunity to run their eye over this best friend. "This all sounds fine, I just wish there was something more we could do. We seem to be reaping all the benefits here without contributing much at all."

Barchoke couldn't turn down such an opening. "Funny you should say that Dan, something that Hermione said interested us greatly..."

-oOoOo-

Eargit delivered a letter to Hermione on Sunday morning that had her squealing with joy - "He said Yes!" She then practically had Harry in a head-lock as her excitement saw her bouncing up and down next to him.

"Guys, making a spectacle of yourselves - again."

"Oh Padma, he said yes - this is wonderful."

"We got that bit Hermione - now we need to know who said yes to what, and why it's so bloody wonderful."

"When Harry said he didn't celebrate Christmas, I wrote to mum and dad about it. They asked his father if Harry could spend Christmas with us, and Barchoke said yes. Do you want to spend Christmas with me Harry?"

It was only now that Hermione noticed Harry had went as stiff as a board, her best friend then pushed away and shot out his seat. Hermione was momentarily devastated, thinking she had done something wrong, that was until she saw where he was headed. Professor Weasley had just entered with a tall battle-scarred goblin that Harry was now bowing deeply to. Hermione thought this was more like a goblin from Tolkien, as different from Barchoke or Master Pitslay to be almost another species of goblin.

"Master Sharpshard, you honour me by coming here..."

"That was not my intention Crow. I am hearing disturbing reports that you are going soft. I came here today to see for myself what has become of all the training I lavished on you - get changed!"

Harry bowed and raced out the door.

Filius had almost choked on his breakfast when he saw who had entered with Bill Weasley. "Albus, Minerva - whatever happens we mustn't intervene. Master Sharpshard is the greatest practitioner with a blade I have ever seen, no student will be in any danger and certainly not harmed."

Minerva was immediately alarmed. "What do you mean Filius?"

"Think Alastor Moody teaching defence - Master Sharpshard's methods are probably something 'Mad-Eye' would heartily endorse and quickly adopt. They may seem severe to those watching but Harry will be used to it. Excuse me, I'm going to tell his friends the same - though I fear I may need to place Miss Granger in a body bind."

Bill hadn't a clue what was going on here. Master Sharpshard had just informed him earlier that he would be accompanying the curse-breaker to Hogwarts today. Watching as Flitwick headed for his students, Bill decided to follow his example.

"Professor Weasley, is that who taught Harry how to fight with a sword?"

It was Filius who answered. "Yes Miss Granger, and I must ask you not to attempt to interfere. Master Sharpshard's methods may

appear brutal to the uninitiated but he really is the greatest blade in the country.."

He was interrupted by Hermione's scream. Harry had just ran back into the hall wearing his dragon hide tunic when the large goblin exploded into action, attacking with a huge battle axe that seemed to appear from nowhere. Harry was a blur as he dodged blow after blow, being backed into the entrance hall. That Master Sharpshard was shouting at him in English gave Harry a fair idea just what was happening here.

"You had a death eater under your blade and let him go free? Then faced nine enemies and, not only did you not kill any of them, you left them able to attack again! Have I been wasting my time teaching you Crow?"

Harry now had his shield on his arm, and used it to deflect the attacking axe. He dodged inside to get into knife range, only to be kicked in the chest and sent flying through the doors. He landed in the entrance hall and rolled, knowing the master would be coming after him. While rolling, he abandoned his shield and sheathed his knife. He sprang to his feet with Hermione's screams ringing in his ears but Gryffindor's sword in his hands.

Loud clangs reverberated around the entrance hall as Gryffindor's sword skilfully deflected the repeated attacks from the battle axe away from Harry. Hermione was trembling, screaming and shouting at the same time, and only Professor Weasley holding her arms stopped the young witch foolishly rushing in regardless. Seeing Harry apparently now holding his own settled Hermione somewhat, though those around watched this deadly battle in awe.

Filius had given up the blade for a wand but could honestly admit to himself Harry had more raw talent than he had ever possessed. Harry's dragon skin tunic allowed everyone to see his fluid body movements as he wielded Gryffindor's sword like a seamless extension of his body. The lad's developed physique was now easily explained, swinging a blade hour after hour would certainly account for it.

Harry was now engrossed in the fight, the clash of his blade deflecting the axe familiar to him from years of training. He'd never wielded a blade quite like this one though, which gave Harry an idea.

It was a risk that could cost him dear, then again it wasn't like he'd ever won a match against the master before.

As the next opportunity presented itself, Harry didn't parry and deflect the axe blade but let the sword made for Godric Gryffindor meet the weapon's shaft. Normally this would send a jarring force right up his arms, but this was no ordinary sword. It cleaved clean through the shaft.

Harry's follow-on attack was then blocked by a short sword that again just seemed to appear in the master's hand. "I was partial to that axe Crow, that is going to cost you."

If anything, the speed of the fight increased, with Harry now swapping to a one-handed grip on the sword and drawing his knife in the other. Harry was soon covered in sweat as Master Sharpshard relentlessly probed and attacked his defences. He could hear Hermione shouting above everyone else which triggered something in his mind - there are no rules in a fight.

As he blocked the next attack on his sword, Harry used his knife to cast a curse they'd learned out the book Padma gave Hermione for her birthday.

The cutting curse was so unexpected, it glanced Master Sharpshard's cheek as he dodged a fraction too late. First blood was normally the end of the duel - but with Master Sharpshard you just didn't know what he would do next.

The large goblin actually stopped attacking. "You cut me with a spell Crow?"

Harry was panting for breath but still kept his guard up. "You taught me to use whatever was available in a fight, that's what I had."

The loud roar of laughter was completely unexpected. The short sword disappeared as quickly as it came while the now jovial goblin punched Harry's shoulder in a very rare show of affection. "It would seem I have taught you well - though I will still be charging your father for my axe you destroyed. Filius, good to see you again. Can I impose on you to cross swords with Crow occasionally? I would hate to see all that skill become rusty from lack of use."

This change from rabid attacker to jovial loser threw everyone. Padma though had something to say - or should that be scream. "Yeah Harry - you did it!"

Everyone in the hall had spilled out to watch this fight, one of their own unbelievably winning resulted in loud cheering - and Hermione escaping from Bill's grasp.

She hit Harry almost as hard as Sharpshard had earlier, though both her arms were wrapped tightly around him. Harry was holding her while whispering in her ear. "Cultural differences Hermione. I was in danger of getting my arse kicked - nothing else."

The large goblin of course noticed the young witch. "Can I assume you are Crow's friend?"

Harry gave Hermione a reassuring squeeze as she turned to face one of his most important tutors. He was delighted to see her bow.

"Well met Master Sharpshard. I am Hermione Granger, Harry's best friend." She then held out her hand for the goblin to shake, her bracelet shining on her wrist.

The large goblin bowed back before accepting her offered hand. "Well met Miss Granger." His deep laugh once more rolled around the entrance hall. "Barchoke told me you were quite the one, now I've seen it for myself. Moments ago, you were ready to attack me with your bare hands to protect your friend - but now you greet me with honour. Wear that bracelet with pride Miss Granger, you have the heart of a goblin."

Hermione was left wondering about that last comment as the headmaster chose this moment to make his presence known. "I really don't appreciate my school being disrupted by these shenanigans."

"And I don't appreciate my star student being attacked by trolls and pureblood bigots in your school. His father has a standing arrangement that this time is scheduled for extra defence lessons, you just got to witness a variation on that theme." Hogwarts students weren't used to seeing the great Albus Dumbledore spoken to like this. The scary goblin though wasn't finished yet.

"Defence should always be varied, you never know where or when the next attack will come from. Surely this is something you teach your students, or do you assume this variety will come from the myriad of people you seem to go through teaching the subject?" The sarcasm in Sharpshard's last remark really drove a battering ram into what passed for defence tuition in Hogwarts, then Hermione battered down what was left of the shoddy doors.

"That's exactly what Professor Weasley has been teaching us in our extra defence lessons, to be alert for the unexpected."

Sharpshard's voice boomed around the entrance hall. "Good, then I will leave you in Curse-breaker Weasley's capable hands. Crow, you know the director is going to be insufferable now your fancy blade he had commissioned drew my blood? Until next time student."

Harry bowed deeply. "Until next time Master Sharpshard."

As the goblin left, Neville approached with Harry's shield. "You actually beat him Harry?"

He took the shield and reduced its size, clipping the disk onto his sword scabbard. "I didn't beat him Neville, no one beats Master Sharpshard. I got lucky and surprised him, he could have taken me at least a dozen times before then. It's called training for a reason, I wouldn't learn anything if he continually beat me in under a minute."

"It looked brutal Harry, I was terrified for you."

Harry could still see the fear in Hermione's eyes. "The first few times we fought I was terrified too Hermione. Now it's just like our defence lessons, Curse-breaker Weasley attacks us so we can practice our dodging and shields."

Padma was half carrying / half dragging the battle axe by its drastically shortened shaft over to the group. "If Professor Weasley ever attacks us with something like this, I'm quitting guys."

"Thanks Padma, I'll be hanging that on my wall. Thanks also for that book you gave Hermione, it was really helpful."



Padma was tempted to tease which of the books he was talking about but Hermione already had a tough morning - and that was her not noticing the number of witches who were eyeing up Harry.

That she was still shaking inside just confirmed to Hermione she hadn't fully recovered from the shock of watching Harry fight, she actually thought her best friend was going to be killed this morning. "That was obviously some goblin thing Harry but I fail to see the point."

Harry smiled at his best friend, this time knowing exactly how to cheer her up. "Master Sharpshard was just reminding me, and everyone else, that I am a goblin warrior..."

Padma had already resisted one teasing opportunity, this couldn't be passed up. She butted in before he could finish. "Next time we could do without the theatrics - and that outfit. Let's get to class, the sight of my sister and Lavender drooling over Harry is making me queasy. Anyone would think they'd never seen a gorgeous guy in a sexy dragon skin tunic before."

Harry was blushing while Hermione appeared outraged before Padma began laughing. "Oh you guys are just too easy to tease. Seriously though, some of these witches are beginning to creep me out. If a wizard ever stared at me like that, I'd want Harry and Neville to kick their arse for me."

"No problem Padma." Harry wanted to get out of there and offered Hermione his arm. He then proceeded to make up for this morning by saying what he'd originally intended to - before Padma had interrupted. "Hermione, I would love to spend Christmas with you."

"Oh Harry, it will be wonderful. Padma, Neville, you are both invited as well."

Neville was delighted to be included but had family things that needed doing then, he told Hermione that before politely declining. Padma would need to write home before she could answer. She loved her sister dearly but the thought of two weeks listening to her prattle on about boys, fashion, boys and more boys was not appealing. That Harry was going to be one of the boys repeatedly mentioned was a certainty.

She knew what the agenda was for most pureblood witches who attended Hogwarts. Meet their future husband, be at least engaged by the time they left school with marriage and their first child born preferably before turning twenty. To wait any longer ran the risk of your family arranging a husband for you. Padma thought that agenda was fine, provided you met someone you wanted to spend the rest of your life with. She wanted more from her Hogwarts experience, and spending a holiday in a muggle house would certainly be an experience.

She would need to have a girls-talk with Hermione and explain why all the jealous looks were being focused in her direction. She may be muggle born but Hermione was already in a position most of the pureblood witches would sell their soul for. Having gotten to know Harry, Padma already knew he would be considered a prize for any young witch. Add in all the other stuff and then pile his wealth on top - well she didn't think the other witches were going to be discouraged for long. She suspected their methods would be different though, unless they were really stupid.

Bill watched his students heading off to class but wanted a quick word with his youngest brother first. "Well Ronnie, still think he's nothing special?"

Ron had his eyes well and truly opened, they had almost popped out watching that fight. "The Patil girl could hardly lift that axe, it would have cut him in half if it had connected. That goblin wasn't holding anything back either."

"That's right Ronnie, yet he beat the goblin warrior that attacked him. What chance do you think you would have had in a fight like that? Perhaps now you'll stop being such a little prick and leave well enough alone."

At that, Percy appeared at his elbow. "I've got this time set aside for Ron to do his homework, I'll take it from here Bill."

The curse-breaker left Percy in charge while he went to deal with his own students. Like everyone else, he'd been impressed with the fight. His brother Charlie had the quickest reflexes of anyone Bill had ever seen - until today. The look of concentration on the lad's face as he fought was also something to behold. Any one letting Harry close enough to use a blade was going to lose - even Voldemort.

-oOoOo-

Dumbledore was also astonished at Harry's reactions and speed of thought. Likewise, he thought Filius was strikingly accurate in equating the goblin fencing tutor to his old friend Alastor, their teaching methods were remarkably similar. Like the rest of Hogwarts, he also didn't miss the 'going soft' reference. After that display, Harry's enemies would not be meeting him head-on for the foreseeable future. Albus expected a few months of quiet now while the plotters evaluated the situation before making their next move.

This situation presented Albus with something of a dilemma, he wanted to wrestle control of the boy away from the goblins but he also knew Voldemort had to be defeated. He needed a way to accomplish his first aim without in any way endangering Harry's chances of successfully completing the second. He was tempted to leave things as they were but knew he couldn't. Master Sharpshard had berated his student for showing a modicum of forgiveness and there lay Albus' problem.

A victorious Harry would have the wizarding community worshipping at his feet and rushing to fulfil his every wish. Without forgiveness in the boy's heart, their society could be changed beyond all recognition. He needed information on exactly what the goblins were up to, and had just watched his unknowing source walk away to teach young Harry and his three friends.

William Weasley would need to understand the harm that could be done here, and pressured into recognising where his loyalties really lay. With a delicate situation like this, it was all about using the right lever - and there was no bigger lever to use against someone than his or her own family.

He was sure it wouldn't take long for a conversation with William's mother to gravitate to Molly telling Albus how pleased she was to have her eldest son back home. That would be his opening to express his regret that William refused to cooperate with him, and that how his time working for the goblins had really changed the former Hogwarts head boy.

Molly hated the very thought of any of her children changing, especially if that influence of change wasn't exactly human. She

would be on her son's case the entire time he was at the Burrow, and Albus would intensify his efforts while William's duties brought him to Hogwarts. This twin attack should soon expose a crack in his armour, that was all Albus needed to exploit the situation.

One bit of information would soon lead to another and then he would have the young man. He would become his spy inside Gringotts, providing information that would help Albus plot the course of magical Britain's future - for the greater good of course.

-oOoOo-

Lucius was trying to plot his future and having very limited success, he was not looking forward to his master's eventual return. The head of the Malfoy family understood that his usefulness as a death eater lay in his fortune and influence. With neither, he would be severely limited in how he could assist his master's plans. Lucius had witnessed first hand what happened to death eaters in that position, and it was anything but pretty.

Lucius was contemplating his next move as he sat staring at a little black diary. With the goblins blocking Narcissa from accessing the Lestrangle or Black vaults, this diary was the only card he had left to play. As with any triumph card, it was all about how and when it was played.

His craving for revenge on Crow was tempered by the fact that the 'Hogwarts Champion' would be helpless against this. Like a fine wine, Lucius' revenge just got better the longer he left it to age. If this was played right, it had the power to see Crow's dead body carried from Hogwarts - with Dumbledore sacked and Fudge forced out of office as the public demanded scapegoats.

Lucius was a patient man and his need for revenge now wouldn't settle for anything less than a triple take down. He could afford to be patient. Patience was about all he could now afford, and it wasn't like he had anything else to do.

A/N thanks for reading

## Chapter 13

Hogwarts did indeed settle down to its new 'normal' over the following weeks. Thanks to the warning from Padma, Hermione was more aware of what was happening around her - or should that be Harry - regarding the behaviour of the Hogwarts witches.

Ravenclaw House were adapting well to what was happening within its own blue and bronze walls. Morag, Mandy and Lisa were all friendly with the trio, sharing Harry's defence and now potions classes too certainly helped. Cho was continually making eyes at Harry, and finding any excuse to talk to him. In these situations, Harry was polite but nothing more. The older Ravenclaw girls - apart from Penny - were staying clear, Chambers example perhaps playing on their mind.

The other first year witches were all on good terms with the friends too, with only the two Gryffindors continually pushing the boundaries. Parvati and Lavender had approached as they walked to class, chatting to Harry a mile a minute. It was when Lavender decided to move things along by latching onto Harry's other arm that she was politely but instantly and firmly rebuffed.

"Miss Brown, never take a sword-wielder's right arm unless it is specifically offered to you. In my culture this can be considered an attack, as you are hampering my ability to draw my weapon." Lavender released Harry's arm as if it was red hot and had just burned her fingers. No one wanted Harry to even think they were attacking him, they had now all seen what he could do with a blade.

He nodded before continuing. "You were not aware of the situation so nothing further needs to be said." Both Gryffindor girls had given him a wide berth after that.

When some of the older girls from the other houses approached, Hermione hoped it wasn't wishful thinking on her part but Harry appeared to use her as a shield. This was a function she was more than happy to provide. These witches may have had a specific agenda at Hogwarts but so did Harry, his agenda though had far more reaching consequences than simply finding someone to marry. Hermione was reminded of this as they were leaving their normal Monday defence class, Professor Weasley had a short message for him.

"Harry, your father says 'it's time', he assured me you would know what that means."

His grin was feral, setting Hermione's danger alarm off. "Harry, please tell me you are not going to go all 'goblin warrior' on us?"

"Hermione, I am a goblin warrior."

"Okay, bad choice of words. What I really meant to ask was if you were going to be rushing into danger with a blade in each hand?"

He could see she was merely worried for his safety so attempted to put her mind at rest. "Hermione, I have been tasked with ending a great wrong - and that's all I can say about the matter until it happens. What I will say is that I shouldn't need either of my blades to defend myself, there will be no danger at all."

After the Lucius Malfoy incident, Hermione had accepted that Harry was at Hogwarts for a purpose other than just receiving a magical education. Here was obviously the next phase of that purpose. That he couldn't tell her any more was fine, that he wouldn't be in any danger was all she really needed to know.

At least this time she had six weeks of magical training under her belt, and a few curses up her sleeve. Hermione believed Harry when he said it wouldn't be dangerous but it was always better to be prepared.

She had also been preparing by reading the book Neville gave her from cover to cover. Hermione thought a lot of the behaviour and customs could at best be described as 'quaint', but it at least explained Harry's 'old world' behaviour. He'd obviously read something similar before attending Hogwarts and thought things like offering a young lady your arm or kissing the backs of their hands was the way wizards behaved normally.

Purely by observation, Hermione could tell that this behaviour was no longer common place amongst the magical fraternity. Perhaps it was now only used at the most formal of occasions or functions but the young witch wasn't too bothered about that. Since she was currently on Harry's arm, and it was her hand being kissed, it would be a cold day in hell before Hermione as much as raised the subject

with her best friend. Hermione could only hope Harry had reached the same conclusion, but enjoyed having her on his arm too much to stop.

Her latest mini faux pas against goblin culture set her mind racing. She didn't rush to the library because Hermione was sure the best source of the information she required was currently walking right beside her.

"Harry, I've read that book Neville gave me on ancient and noble houses. It was very insightful, a brilliant source of information for someone like me with no magical background. I was wondering if there was a book like that on goblin culture? I could see if it was in the library or order it from the bookstore."

Harry had actually stopped walking as Hermione's question set him thinking. "The short answer is no, there are no books. I think the reason for that is probably because no one has ever been interested before."

"Okay, confused again. How could no one be interested? The goblins store and control the magical community's wealth, yet no one knows anything about them - that's just nuts!"

It was a chuckling Harry that started them off down the corridor again as he answered his best friend. "You'll get no objection from me on that. I think the reason there may be no books is that they really need to be written by an outsider observing a culture that's different to their own, goblins tend not to let strangers get too close." He could see Hermione struggling with that concept so tried to give her an example. "We could ask Padma to tell us about her years in India, and she could talk for hours. That doesn't mean she would mention riding a flying carpet, because to her that would just be normal behaviour and not worth talking about."

"I see what you mean now, you need someone from another culture to observe what is different - and also what is the same."

"Exactly, goblins always hold their beheading muggle parties on the last Friday of every month - who knows when wizards have theirs."

"Harry Crow, don't you dare. I get more than enough teasing from Padma without you starting too!"

"Why Miss Granger, is that any way to talk to your only source on all things goblin?"

Hermione let out a groan. "I was going to say I could check with Master Pitslay but I can just see you both setting me up for a fall. Just remember Crow, you're staying with me for the Christmas holidays. I'm your only source for all things muggle and payback can be a bitch." She tried to be stern but couldn't quite manage it, both of them ended up laughing as they made their way back to the Ravenclaw common room.

-oOoOo-

In the Gryffindor common room, Neville was trying to prepare for this week's potion's lesson. Ron was bored though, and kept pestering him to play wizard chess.

"Go and ask Seamus, I'm busy Ron."

"Dean's telling him all about that football game again. Did you know they played it on the ground? Twenty-two players and only one ball - bloody mental if you ask me."

"Ron, I didn't ask you. I am actually trying to get some work done here."

When he took the time to actually look at what Neville was doing, Ron got the distinct impression he was being conned. "That's potions, you said this goblin creature never gave out homework." It wasn't a question, more like an accusation.

"Master Pitslay doesn't have us writing essays, he does expect us to know everything about the potion we will be brewing before we step into his class."

Ron still thought this was merely a manufactured excuse to dump him. "It's only Monday, you don't have potions until Friday. You'll have forgotten it all by then."

"No I won't, because I'll be going over my notes every night until Friday."



"Bloody hell, I tried to warn you. See what happens when you hang out with Ravenclaws, us Gryffindors have got to stick together."

"If sticking together means taking potion lessons from Snape then you can forget it."

"Where is your house loyalty? Abandoning your housemates and siding with Ravenclaws, you're a disgrace to Gryffindor Longbottom."

Neville was on his feet at that. "You're a fine one to call me a disgrace, you fired a curse at a girl! Real brave Gryffindor, didn't even have the courage to apologise."

"I bloody did, you were there."

"Anyone can say the words Ron, we all knew you didn't mean any of it. Harry just didn't want to get into an argument with you and spoil Hermione's birthday. You call me a disgrace to Gryffindor yet I'm in a class with nine Ravenclaws, I'm ahead of six and keeping up with another two. I would say I was doing my house proud. What have you got to show for your time at Hogwarts? Detentions, lost points, a suspension and now on probation - way to go Ronnie boy."

Ron's complexion was turning deeper and deeper shades of red but Neville just faced him down. "You've tried to curse two of my friends, and actually managed to hit the other one by accident. Draw your wand on me Ron and you'll get to see just what your eldest brother teaches us every weekend."

Their confrontation had gotten louder and louder, gathering a rather large crowd. Two of the crowd suddenly had an arm each as Ron's feet left the floor, the twins whisked him away up the stairs.

Neville sat back down and continued his work, until Parvati spoke to him. "Neville, six and two only make eight. You said there were nine Ravenclaws in that class."

"Ah, but when it comes to potions, Harry is in a class of his own. Even the twins couldn't brew a potion that would be undetectable by Snape."

As he worked studiously, Neville was unaware of the changes taking place around him. Most of the house just had their opinion of the shy, quiet boy drastically altered. Especially two first year witches who were having no success with their repeated attempts to get near Harry Crow. Neville Longbottom might just turn out to be a rather fine replacement.

-oOoOo-

Bill also had a Weasley harping on at him while he attempted to accomplish a task, he should have known better. A quiet meal at the Burrow was as good a definition of a misnomer that Bill could think of.

"But he's Albus Dumbledore, surely there must be some way to bypass those secrecy terms to help?"

He put down his knife and fork, Bill had had more than enough – both of dinner and his mother's nagging. It was time for a few home truths. "Would you be so insistent if it was Lucius Malfoy who wanted information?"

"Don't be ridiculous, he's a death eater who used his money to avoid Azkaban."

"Yet to a goblin, both are classed the same. Dumbledore has been barred from Gringotts for a decade..."

"That was over a misunderstanding..."

Bill finally lost it at his mother. "If that's the story he's putting about then it makes him a liar too, I'll tell you about your great Albus Dumbledore. He left an orphan child on a muggle doorstep, a child who had been hit with the killing curse by Voldemort."

He didn't know if the yelp from his mother was because the dreaded name was spoken aloud, or that it was one of her children saying it. Bill pressed on regardless. "That child was sporting a scar on his head, no healer, no treatment, just dumped on a doorstep with a letter attached. Now here is where his stupid scheme started to fall apart, the muggles didn't want a magical child in their home so took Harry to Gringotts and deposited the toddler who saved us all there."

Molly had tears in her eyes as she shook her head. "It can't be true..."

"Harry's father still has the letter in Dumbledore's handwriting, McGonagall and Hagrid were present that night too. Hagrid keeps attempting to talk to Harry at Hogwarts but the boy wants nothing to do with him. He knows Hagrid is Dumbledore's man, and anything he said would make its way straight back to the old fool..."

This was still a step too far for Molly. "Albus Dumbledore is no fool, I will not have that said in this house."

"Do you know how that troll got into Hogwarts? Dumbledore is desperately trying to keep it secret but Madam Bones wants him up on charges for his part in the fiasco. Voldemort is not dead..."

This time he was sure what had caused his mother to scream. "You're lying, Harry Potter killed him – everyone knows that."

"Yes, but what everyone doesn't know is that he's trying to come back. Why do you think I returned from Egypt and took this job? Voldemort is not dead, and we know he's going after Harry. Dumbledore knew this and didn't tell anyone, especially Harry. Instead, Dumbledore set a trap inside a bloody school. I have four younger brothers currently in that castle and that old bastard is playing with their lives. Voldemort possessed a teacher and was actually inside Hogwarts, that's who let the troll in."

Bill hadn't realised he'd been shouting but it looked as if he'd finally gotten through to his mother, unfortunately it also looked like he'd terrified Ginny. She was curled on his father's lap and crying. "The goblins are doing everything in their power to help that young man, I have no idea what Dumbledore is up to. As a Weasley, my position on this matter should be crystal clear - against the dark and for the light. My champion though is not some old wizard who likes to play games, but a young man who defeated Voldemort once before. I am on the side of the goblins because they are backing Harry to the hilt, as am I."

Arthur was trying to sooth his daughter but really needed to know something. "How much of this is known within the ministry?"

"Fudge and Bones were there the day Harry laid most of the Voldemort stuff out, that was also the day he took down Lucius Malfoy. The details of what Dumbledore did to Harry, I got from his father. Dumbledore is the head of the Wizengamot, yet it took one of my students to do what should have been done years ago. With Gringotts backing Harry's actions, Malfoy has legally been stripped of his wealth - and with it most of his power too."

Events at the ministry began to fall into place for Arthur. "I wondered why there was a sudden recruitment drive in the auror department, we were left wondering if Amelia had finally gotten something on Fudge. That was probably her pay-off for Malfoy not standing public trial. The minister would be too afraid of just what Lucius might reveal under veritaserum."

Molly's mind though was stuck on one single fact, a single fact that would change her outlook forever. "You-know-who was near four of my babies, and Albus bloody Dumbledore never even mentioned it!"

Bill knew what his mother's next action would be, and tried to head it off. "Mum, don't mention we had an argument over this. By all means say you've heard a certain rumour, just not where you heard it. It might be fun to hear what excuse he comes up with, I trust Dumbledore about as far as I could throw Hagrid."

Arthur was busy trying to comfort his daughter. "It's okay Ginny, your brothers will be safe inside Hogwarts."

"What about my Harry, Bill said the bad wizard was coming back for him."

Bill couldn't let that go. "I thought we talked about this Ginny? He's not your Harry, you've never even met him."

"Bill, it's just a harmless infatuation..."

"No dad, it's not healthy and should have been discouraged years ago. The last thing I want to see is Ginny getting hurt, but that's exactly what's going to happen if she doesn't stop this now. How do you think Ginny's going to react when she discovers this whole boy-who-lived fantasy she's constructed is just that - a fantasy." He absolutely hated to see his sister cry but this needed to be said.

"Ginny's fantasy will inevitably come crashing down around her ears, Harry doesn't even know she exists and already has his own set of close friends. At this point she will be heartbroken, and six hundred miles from home. The twins and Percy are barely coping with Ron's problems, do you honestly think they will be able to handle something like this?"

"How do you know Harry won't like me? You can't possibly know that."

He tried to phrase his answer in a way that would be as gentle as possible for his sister to take, yet at the same time get his point across. "Harry Crow is a very serious young lad, only the fact that he's in first year gives his age away. If you didn't know that, you would swear he was older. His friends are also really serious, about their studies and being his friend. Every weekend I think I've pushed them too hard, yet the following week they're back and eager for more. They are rattling through the defence course, doing the same with potions and near the top of all their other classes. I have no idea what level they'll be at by the time they're ready to start second year."

Bill could see this was not well received, and knew the next bit would be even less so. "We already have one Weasley at Hogwarts disgracing himself due mainly to his immaturity, we really don't need a Weasley fan girl following Harry around like a little lost puppy. The fantasy needs to stop here before Ginny gets really hurt. I'm not saying she'll never be friends with Harry - I'll even introduce her - but this fantasising over a boy she's never seen - never mind met - is not going to end well."

Ginny focused only on one part of what her brother said. "You would introduce me - to Harry?"

Bill was torn, he wanted his sister to put this behind her but Ginny clearly hadn't. Introducing her to Harry might just be the shock Ginny needed to get over this infatuation, especially if Harry had a certain young witch on his arm. "I'll introduce you to Harry when he gets off the express for the holidays."

He could see her eyes practically sparkling at that but had to give a warning. "Harry's going to be spending Christmas with his best

friend, Hermione asked both him and Padma to spend the holidays at her house."

It looked as if Ginny had been told she'd won the Prophet grand draw, only then to be informed there was a mistake. "His best friend? Isn't that the girl Ron mentioned as his girlfriend?"

"Hermione Granger currently wears a goblin made gold bracelet that's inscribed Harry, Hermione, best friends forever. Harry gave it to Hermione for her twelfth birthday." Bill felt as though he was having to be cruel to be kind with Ginny. He'd watched as witches older and far more developed - both emotionally and physically - than Ginny had been rebuffed by his student. They were mostly mature enough to accept the knock-back - Ginny wasn't.

He watched as his sister made an excuse before heading up to her room. Arthur waited until she had left before confronting his eldest. "Was that really necessary?"

"Yes dad it was. You've been filling Ginny's head with this boy-who-lived nonsense for years."

"It's only a children's story book..."

"To us yes, but Ginny believes every word of it. Why shouldn't she, her father read it to her. The difference between this and Babbity Rabbity is that little girls don't grow up thinking they're destined to marry the hero and live happily ever after - and then have to go to school with the hero!"

"She's only ten - Ginny isn't thinking anything of the sort."

Bill knew Ginny was his father's favourite, the entire family knew it, but he still saw his daughter as much younger than she actually was. It would be a big wrench when Ginny left for Hogwarts next September. "Dad, I found Ginny on her bed crying her eyes out, clutching that bloody book. Do you know why? Ron told her Harry already had a girlfriend. It's one thing to daydream on what you would like to happen in life, Ginny is struggling to tell her fantasy from real life. I've been trying to convince her he's nothing like the book but now she seems ready to fixate on Harry Crow. Maybe seeing him in real life will shock her out of this. If not, we've still got the next eight months to think of something."

Molly was shaking her head. "I always thought the twins were our biggest problem, now I'm not so sure. Ron's in far more serious trouble than they've ever been, and Ginny seems set to bring us a whole new set of problems. Where did we go wrong with those two?"

Bill had some words of comfort for his parents. "Neither Ron nor Ginny are bad kids, both just need time to grow-up. It will be keeping them in Hogwarts while they do their growing that might be the problem."

-oOoOo-

As the first years were leaving charms class next day, Parvati thought she would make her move - before Lavender got in there first. Harry and Hermione were in front, with Neville and her sister just behind them. There wouldn't be a better opportunity.

"Why Mr Longbottom, I thought you were a gentleman? Your friend there Mr Crow is showing the way so why don't you have a young lady on your arm?"

Neville noticed rather a lot of people were now looking at him. This Neville though had good friends, friends who gave him the confidence to do what he needed to.

"You are correct, I apologise for my oversight. Miss Patil, would you do me the honour?"

Parvati was overjoyed her ploy had worked, that was until she saw Neville offering his arm to her sister.

"Why Mr Longbottom, I would be delighted." Padma was walking away on Neville's arm, but she still took time to turn her head round and wink at her twin.

"Thanks for that Padma, your sister and her friend are a little too 'clingy' for me."

"Oh no problem Neville, I'll guard your body any time you like. This is wonderful material for teasing, do you think it would be too cruel to thank Parvati? I was working along the lines of her remark bringing

us together. If she hadn't said anything, who knows how long it would have taken for you to ask me out?" She couldn't hold her laughter as Neville's jaw dropped lower and lower. "This is just too good, the same lines should work just as well on Pav too. I'll take your arm anytime you want Neville - as your friend."

After the panic had passed, Neville found it was quite nice to be teased by a friend. "Do you want to sit with me at the Gryffindor table? I think we could have your sister and Lavender green with envy by the end of lunch."

"Neville, that's a brilliant idea - providing I don't need to sit where I can see Ron eat." Padma rested her head on his shoulder as they walked arm in arm to the great hall, both were struggling to contain their giggles at the reaction this got from other students.

Hermione noticed exactly what was happening with her friends, she barely managed a smile though. All her concentration was on her best friend. "It's going to be soon, isn't it?"

"Goblins are masters of hiding their emotions, impossible to read - sometimes it scares me just how well you can tell practically what I'm thinking. Remember, no one will be in any danger. Now let's both go and attempt to eat some lunch."

Hermione didn't have too long to wait, the hammer fell their very next class.

-oOoOo-

Professor Binns was droning on as usual, and as usual half the class were struggling to stay awake. That all changed when Harry Crow stood, this could be history in the making.

Harry waited until the professor noticed him standing there. "As Hogwarts champion, I can no longer permit you to continue inflicting this torture and lies onto students. As a goblin, you disgust me almost as much as that butcher you called grandfather."

"How dare you sully my grandfather's good name. He died a hero, fighting in the goblin rebellion of 1620..."



"Bloody Binns and his band of cutthroats were responsible for starting what you refer to as the goblin rebellion of 1620. They didn't die heroes, they were tried, convicted of their many crimes and sentenced to goblin justice."

Binns was putting more emotion into this argument than anyone had ever seen him use during teaching, no one would be falling asleep in this class. "By what rights do goblins try wizards, they should have handed them over to the ministry - where they could have received a fair trial..."

"Where they could have been released by wizards who thought the same as them, that murdering goblins was not a crime. They expected to be released and boasted of their atrocities, all thought the purity of their blood protected them. Guess what professor, dragons don't give a shit how pure someone's blood is, they just chew you up."

If a ghost could appear shocked, Binns managed it. "Their bodies were fed to dragons?"

"No, they were thrown still alive into the dragon pens. They screamed for mercy but received the same they had shown us - none whatsoever."

"You lying goblin bastard!" Binns literally flew at Harry but not having a body rendered his attack harmless. The rest of the class were shocked, both at Binns actions and Harry's description of what the goblins did to their prisoners.

Only Hermione was brave enough to ask a question. "Harry, do goblins really throw people in with dragons."

"Only for the very worst atrocities Hermione, and only after a fair trial has found them guilty. Just about every culture has or had some form of death penalty, none were ever pleasant. From being burned at the stake to beheading, hanging to having your soul sucked out your body by one of the foulest creatures on the planet. That last one is currently wizarding Britain's answer to the problem."

"What did they do Harry?"

This was something Binns had never experienced in all his years of teaching, he wasn't sure how to handle the situation but tried to reassert his classroom authority. "They didn't do anything but were killed by vicious goblin raiders. My father told me the story since I was a little boy, I grew up with this - you think I don't know what happened?"

Harry remained very calm as he answered Binns, there was no point in losing your temper to a ghost. "If that is your only source of information, then yes. We live in a community where no one ever checks information - 'it said so in the Prophet so it must be true' is not an acceptable method to prove the truth. I'll tell you what really happened..."

Binns was incensed at this. "You will sit back down and shut up boy, there will be no goblin propaganda spouted in this class."

"You are right about one thing professor, there should be no propaganda here. This is a history class yet you have used your position to preach anti-goblin propaganda for almost three centuries, installing fear, mistrust and even hatred against us into children placed in your care. That all stops today. I intend to tell everyone the goblin version of events and let them make up their own minds to who's telling the truth."

"Fifty points from Ravenclaw, and it will soon be a hundred if you don't sit down at once."

"The truth is far more important than any number of house points. It's time for some real history to be told in this class. You see, goblins didn't always live only under Gringotts..."

"They were forced to live there by treaty, it's all covered in OWL's."

"It may be covered but it's all lies, lies that have slowly become what is now regarded as fact. This happened because a certain professor has deliberately fed the same lies to everyone who has passed through Hogwarts for the last two hundred and eighty years - man and ghost. Do you know British OWL and NEWT passes in History aren't recognised outside this country? The rest of the world realises what he teaches is wrong, biased and disproportionate - it's one supposed goblin rebellion after another supposed goblin rebellion."

The entire course has become a joke but still nothing is done about it."

It was a shocked Terry Boot who asked the question that they were all struggling with. "Why would they teach us something they know is wrong?"

"Ah, you're forgetting Terry, the people in power were all taught the same shit we are being fed - by the same professor. Even the author of our text book - Bathilda Bagshot - was taught her history classes by Binns - she apprenticed under him. Is it any wonder her writings match Binns accounts of things? In this country she's hailed as a great historian, outside Britain she's ignored and even thought a touch mad."

"Is that what you are trying to do here boy, tear down reputations people have spent decades building?"

"It's better than tearing down dwellings, just because the occupants are goblins. That's what Bloody Binns did, male - female - child, it didn't matter to them as they slaughtered every goblin they could find. They didn't want goblins living amongst what they called good wizards, so they systematically set about slaughtering those who dared pollute what the purebloods considered theirs by birth."

Harry was trying to keep himself calm and let the facts speak for themselves as he'd been taught, it was proving difficult though. "The ministry was turning a blind eye to what was happening, after all it was only goblins who were being slaughtered and they didn't count. When the goblins caught the wizards in the act, they demanded to be handed over to the ministry. They were standing there splattered with goblin blood and expected to be released, they were tried like the crazed animals they were and executed."

The class were hanging on Harry's every word, and ignoring the continual docking of points from Binns. "The ministry had to take action, there were now purebloods dead. As usual, the ministry decided to pass laws to get what they wanted. The ministry attempted to claim jurisdiction over the goblins, basically meaning we had to do what they said. No goblin was going to stand for that and so we have the goblin 'rebellion' of 1620. There were many deaths on both sides as the ministry attempted to impose their new laws before common sense prevailed."

"Your precious goblins were defeated and slunk back to their holes in the ground. That's where the filthy animals belong - not staying amongst decent magical people."

Harry ignored the ghostly spittle that Binns was spraying him with as the professor screamed at him - mere inches away from his face, Harry had to finish the task he'd trained for. "The ministry were forced to concede that the goblins were their own masters, and that Gringotts was sovereign territory. This didn't stop them passing anti-goblin laws that prevented us buying land or housing anywhere near a wizard dwelling. To some, this didn't go far enough..."

"Of course it didn't go far enough, my grandfather was only one of many the bastards murdered. The entire species should have been wiped out..."

Harry had just about enough of this ghost. It had been pure torture having to sit in this class, knowing what he did. "The reason Professor Binns here never took up his wand and avenged his beloved grandfather was that he didn't have one - a wand that is. You see, our professor here was a squib. Now I personally don't have a problem with that, but our ghostly professor did. He grew into a bitter and twisted man, much like a certain caretaker we all know. His only purpose left in life was revenge, revenge against the race of 'creatures' he wanted to see exterminated."

"Typical goblin, honeyed words to your face while they stab you in the back. Not content with murder, you robbed the Binns family blind - we lost everything!"

"Yes, the Binns family lost their home, land and gold - but not to the goblins. Your father was barred from Gringotts for an incident that he was lucky to escape with his life, leaving you to inherit the family fortune when you came of age..."

"I never received a Knut, you goblin bastards stole everything."

"We took only the agreed vault rental, until the vault was closed by the ministry. It was the purebloods of the Wizengamot who passed the law that squibs couldn't inherit pureblood fortunes. They also sneaked a clause into the agreement of 1620 where, after a century, those unclaimable vaults passed to the ministry. Since they were

effectively robbing their own, we goblins took the view this was none of our business."

This was information Draco had a vested interest in. "Are you saying the ministry claimed the Binns family vault?"

"Vault, land, home and all family possessions. Everything was sold to swell the ministry's coffers. When his father died, the professor here was forced to seek a job in Hogwarts as he couldn't even access the home he'd been raised in. He died just before the century was up so at least didn't see the ministry take everything, but he refused to cross over because he had unfinished business..."

"Yes I have unfinished business, to ensure wizards are never taken in by you thieving, lying, murdering goblin bastards ever again."

Filius had been alerted that something was wrong when the Ravenclaw points counter began spiralling downwards, he could only think of one person capable of wiping out the entire total of accumulated points in a single period. The Ravenclaw head of house entered the history classroom and witnessed a ghostly professor screaming in a most unprofessional manner at one of his students.

Seeing Harry was unphased, and in no danger, Filius decided to just observe for now.

"Even in death, he wouldn't give up his life's work. Ensuring relationships between goblins and wizards never progressed beyond where they are today - strained at best. By teaching lies to generations of children, wizards and witches are taught that goblins are to be feared and detested - never trusted. I'll bet every witch and wizard in this room - apart from the muggle born - have been taught only one thing about us from their parents. Never mess with a goblin."

Binns was still shouting, though had given up all pretence of justifying his behaviour as anything but revenge. "You ruined my life and I won't rest until I have my vengeance. I'll cross over when every last goblin in the country has been slain. Knowing I played a small part in that will be enough for me."

"When you crossover is nothing to do with me, I cannot allow you to remain in the castle."

The ghostly professor actually laughed at this. "What are you going to do goblin-lover, hold an exorcism? You don't have the power to force me out the castle. I was here long before you were born, and still be here after the dark lord kills you. He has also promised to wipe your kind out, that was why I helped him so much when he was a student here."

This revelation drew gasps of astonishment from the entire class.

That revelation was unexpected but Harry knew he had Binns now, condemned by his own words. "I can't, but others can. Have you heard enough?"

The four house ghosts passed into the room, all appeared grave. Helena spoke for all of them. "Yes young champion, we have." There was then a loud clang last heard at the sorting.

The Bloody Baron took over. "Hogwarts has spoken. She provided shelter and allowed you to continue with your passion to teach, only for you to betray her in the worst possible way."

The Fat Friar was next. "Systematically lying to her children to further your own aims is despicable. You are no longer welcome within these walls."

Sir Nicholas then demonstrated the heads were united in this. "You can cross over or be banished from the castle. Those are your only choices..."

The ghostly professor wasn't given any time to make a decision, Hogwarts had already made her mind up. Another loud clang and it seemed as if invisible hands were dragging a screaming Binns through the castle walls.

The headmaster came rushing into the class, having heard Hogwarts 'speak' and instantly come to the same conclusion as Filius as to who would most likely be responsible. He burst through the classroom door, just in time to see a Hogwarts Professor forcibly ejected from the castle. His gaze also focused on the only student

who was standing. "Mr Crow, I want some answers - and I want them right now!"

A/N thanks for reading

## Chapter 14

"Mr Crow, I want some answers - and I want them right now!"

Harry didn't get time to answer the headmaster as, in a manner scarily reminiscent of Professor McGonagall, Ravenclaw's Morag McDougal displayed her fiery Scottish temper for all to see. The angry Ravenclaw jumped in with both feet and asked Dumbledore a couple of questions she thought should be answered first.

"Headmaster, as well as being Chief Warlock of Britain, you are also Supreme Mugwump of the ICW. How could you not know the history qualifications at Hogwarts were laughed at in the rest of the world. I think you should tell us why you let this continue?"

Dumbledore was so shocked that a first year would actually question him, he didn't know what to say. Where was the reverence that students would normally show him, the reverence Albus was certain he deserved. Harry actually supplied the answer before Dumbledore could speak.

"Oldest reason in the world Morag, economics. Hogwarts has seven core subjects and for the last two hundred years one of them has been taught for free. Binns is widely acknowledged as a crap teacher but he was cheap - you don't have to pay a ghost. Binns used this fact to his advantage while continuing to spread his own brand of poison."

Albus eventually got his question answered, it was supplied by Helena. "Hogwarts requires a new history professor, Binns was using his position to spread misinformation and further his own personal vendetta against the goblin nation. While we are willing to admit this was a problem you inherited, your inactions on this matter since becoming headmaster do not please us. We have lived in this castle for many centuries and have become detached from the outside world, we rely on each headmaster to keep Hogwarts on the correct path. A path that sees her graduating students sought-after the world over - not laughed at."

Harry bowed deeply to Helena. "My lady, with Hogwarts permission, we goblins have the solution in hand."



Albus didn't like the sound of this so-called solution one bit. "And what will this solution consist of Mr Crow? Are there going to be lessons on how to hug a goblin?"

"I don't think so headmaster, though Hermione and Padma could probably teach that course if you really think it's necessary?"

Neville's uncontrollable laughter set the rest of the class off as Harry turned and winked at his two mortified friends.

Filius managed to hide his amusement and ask Harry the question he was certain the lad wanted to answer. "I'm sure it's just a particular goblin Miss Granger and Miss Patil want to hug, just as I'm sure Mr Crow's plans are a lot more advanced than that. Why don't you tell us about them Harry?"

"Thank you Master Flitwick. My father didn't want his son leaving Hogwarts with an OWL or NEWT that wasn't worth the parchment it was written on. As I am fluent in several languages, it would be easy for me to study and sit the accredited French or German history exam - but what about everyone else? That just wasn't good enough, and a solution had to be found."

As Harry was spending more time with his housemates, they were getting to know him better. It was this that gave Lisa Turpin the confidence to ask a Harry a question. "Is that why you waited until today Harry, so the problem could be fixed?"

"Yes Lisa, a course that meets the European standard had to be thrashed out, text books sourced and translated into English before a professor could be found to teach the new course - it took a while."

Albus was shocked. "...and just who will pay for all this Mr Crow?"

Harry had a knowing smirk on his face. "Headmaster, if there is one thing we goblins understand - it's economics. We are also well aware what would happen if Hogwarts was forced to put its prices up. The professor and all the text books will be funded by the newly formed Lily Potter Foundation. Unfortunately, this will only apply to the first four years at the moment. This is purely because anyone in their OWL year or over wouldn't have time to learn the new materials - the fourth years are going to have to work their socks off for a shot

at the new exam. You will have to provide a teacher for the upper years until the new course rolls out to everyone."

This was more than Albus could possibly have hoped for, but he wanted to clarify one thing before graciously accepting. "The course parameters have been set by the European Education Board?"

"Yes sir, they approved everything otherwise Hogwarts would be no better off - and we goblins would be doing the exact same as Binns. The materials will be in the library for any older students wanting to attempt the new exams but our education experts felt it might pull their other marks down if they concentrated on a new history course."

"I shall pass this news, and your experts advice on to the heads of house. I feel they are in the best position to judge their students' capabilities. I will abide by their recommendations. I am delighted we can work together on this matter Mr Crow."

The entire class watched in disbelief as the headmaster stood there claiming credit for something he had nothing to do with - and didn't know anything about until moments ago. The daughter of Rowena Ravenclaw wasn't for letting Dumbledore get away with that though. "Our champion approached us on this matter, and asked for our assistance. We took care of the problem and our champion provided the solution, your help was neither asked for nor required. Hogwarts accepts her champion's solution and we will inform the heads of our houses exactly what happened here today. Professor Flitwick saw most of it and I would value his opinion at this point?"

"Hearing a Hogwarts professor boast he helped the dark lord all he could so Voldemort would wipe out the goblin nation has left me feeling dirty that I even knew Binns."

The loud 'WHAT!' from Dumbledore rivalled the clang of Hogwarts for sheer number of decibels achieved.

"We all heard him say it Albus, his hatred for the goblin nation was barely below the surface but surprised even me with its intensity. As to the new history course, I think my opinion matches Mr Crow's experts. I can think of no more than a handful of older Ravenclaws who could possibly manage that amount of extra work alongside their existing exams, and think the other three houses would

struggle to come up with that many between them. I fail to see the point though in continuing with a course where the pass isn't worth the parchment it's printed on. I shall be recommending to my Ravenclaws that they drop history and use the time to study for other subjects."

It was then they noticed Draco had his hand up. "Can I ask a question sir? Mr Crow claims to have found us a new professor, is this professor goblin or wizard?"

All eyes moved to Harry who quickly decided to use this opportunity to his advantage. This was something he had been mulling over for a few weeks and he'd just been handed a golden invitation to say what was on his mind. "In all honesty I don't know, and also don't really care. I just know anyone my father employs will be extremely good at their job - or they won't have that job very long. Isn't that what really matters?"

Harry knew he would take his own house with him on this one. After their first potions lesson with a goblin tutor, they would be fools to think otherwise - and fools didn't get sorted into Ravenclaw.

"If you go through life limiting your choices of who you will associate with by little things like blood purity, Hogwarts house or even what quidditch team they support, then you have my sympathies. If I did that, who would I have as a friend? There aren't exactly too many people in my position."

He glanced toward Hermione, Neville and Padma before continuing. "Take a look at my three closest friends and I, by any rights our friendship shouldn't work. An ancient British pureblood, an Indian pureblood whose ancestry is probably even older, a girl who didn't know she was a witch until her eleventh birthday and me, a child raised by goblins. We have massive cultural differences between us, differences that raise issues practically every single day. When those issues are raised, we talk about them. Padma said she preferred her flying carpet in India to a broom, I enjoyed my first broom flight but who wouldn't want a shot on a flying carpet? Some of the stuff Hermione tells us you would swear she was making up, except she promised to show us for real."

He glanced over at his friends again to see them smiling at him so Harry knew he wasn't in trouble. "We have differences of opinion,

but that's all they are. Friends don't need to be the exact same to get along, just agree to differ on some things. Why should it matter if our new tutor is a wizard, goblin or even a centaur - just as long as they can teach us what we need to know?"

Albus could see the lad was impressing his peers with this line of reasoning and wanted to put a stop to it at once, he well remembered another young wizard whose personality had the power to charm the birds from the trees. "This is all very well Mr Crow but I am down a professor, when will this new History Professor be available to start?"

"Oh I would imagine within a few days headmaster, and the house ghosts have already agreed to cover classes until they get here."

Albus was left standing there like some spare prick at a wedding. This was supposed to be his school but more and more of the decisions were being taken without any input from him. He would need to corner William Weasley the next time he paid a visit, Albus desperately needed to know just what the goblins final objective was here - preferably before Albus too found himself ejected from the castle. "Carry on then." As he made to leave, Filius stopped him.

"What about the house points Binns deducted from Ravenclaw before he was thrown out?"

"You know I have a non-interference policy on those matters professor, I dare say they were deserved deductions." Albus thought he was claiming at least a slight victory, he hadn't reckoned on the house ghosts.

Helena was first. "Mr Crow, fifty points for bringing this matter to our attention, and another fifty for resolving Hogwarts history professor problem."

Sir Nicolas then got in on the act. "Miss McDougal, fifty points for having the courage to ask the headmaster that searching question - a question we all noticed he didn't answer."

The Bloody Baron wasn't going to be left out. "Mr Boot, fifty points for asking a question that got right to the heart of the matter."

That left the Fat Friar adding numbers in his ghostly head. "Miss Granger thirty four points for being a good and loyal friend. If I'm not mistaken, that takes Ravenclaw back to where they were at the start of the period."

After just publicly stating he had a non-interference policy on house points, Albus was powerless to do anything. He left the class as the Hufflepuff ghost made the final proclamation, skulking back to his office.

-oOoOo-

As they left a class none of them would ever forget, Hermione had one final question for the wizard whose arm she was on. "Harry, what did you mean by knowing what would happen if Hogwarts put its prices up?"

Harry tried to think of an easy way to say this but eventually just told it straight. "Magical Britain is a very male-dominated culture. Most pureblood witches are destined to raise children and adorn their husband's arm at social functions, they are sent to Hogwarts in the hope of meeting that husband. If the prices were to be pushed up too far, some fathers would question the expense of a formal education. They could decide not send them to Hogwarts - just choosing a likely husband for their daughter instead."

Hermione was so shocked she dropped Harry's arm. "...but that's - that's just.."

As Hermione struggled for words, Harry tried to come to her aid. "...a different culture Hermione? I stood in front of the entire first year and said we can talk out any differences, please don't make a liar out of me."

She had only one thought on her mind. "Harry, please tell me goblin society isn't the same?"

The pleading in her voice touched something deep within Harry. He led his best friend over to a small, windowed alcove and both of them sat on the bench-seat recessed there. "Goblins are a warrior race Hermione, you need to remember that with what I'm about to tell you. There are certain restrictions that goblin culture places on its females with regard to careers."

He could see Hermione ready to comment on that so quickly continued with his explanation. "Females attend all the same classes as males do, though are more likely to be tutored in the use of lighter weapons in combat class. While they are certainly taught how to fight, it's more so they can defend themselves and their families - no goblin female can become a warrior or would ever be expected to fight in a war."

This was something Hermione could grasp. There was currently a great debate in the British Army as to whether woman could fight as front line troops. It was a debate in which there were no quick or easy answers so she could understand the goblin position on this.

Harry took Hermione nodding her head as a good sign so continued. "Goblin females are also barred from working at any of the counters in Gringotts - but not for the reason you might think. Goblins are trained in how to deal with surly and sometimes downright rude wizards and witches who use Gringotts. No goblin warrior could ever stand by while a goblin female received the same abuse, there would be heads rolling along the bank floor on a daily basis."

Hermione had now witnessed Harry's protectiveness on more than one occasion, it was a trait that made her go weak at the knees. Again, she had no problem imagining a Gringotts guard taking a blade to a wizard who happened to shout abuse at a female goblin.

"There are females whose greatest wish is to marry, raise children and be a full time mother, just like there are ones who wish to choose a career too. You told me your mother and father are forms of healer who work together. A husband and wife who were both healers would not be an unusual occurrence in our society. In the magical community, this would be much more of a rarity."

"Harry, all I really wanted to know was that the female goblins got to make their own decisions. Barring a few positions that you've explained, it would appear so."

"We are still a male dominated society Hermione, no female could head a house. At the same time, no head of house would ever have anything to do with an arranged marriage - and goblin betrothal contracts just don't exist."

Hermione's voice became a squeak as she struggled to get the words out. "Betrothal contracts?"

"Oh, the purebloods just love their betrothal contracts, I think there's about a sack full of them somewhere in Gringotts with Harry Potter's name on them. The last of the Potters is apparently quite a prize, there certainly will be offers in that sack from fathers of witches we both know in Hogwarts."

Hermione's mouth was suddenly incredibly dry but she had to know. "What do you think of that?"

Harry shrugged. "I'm a goblin warrior that has been given a mission, a mission I need to complete before I can live my life in peace. Until Voldemort is no longer a threat, I won't even consider anything like that. When he's gone, I know exactly what I want though."

Hermione had stopped breathing as she desperately waited for Harry to continue. He appeared to be staring at something that wasn't there while she just wanted him to end this agony.

"My father told me my dad and mum were, as well as being a powerful and formidable couple, very much in love. That's what I want." He looked to his best friend for her opinion, to see Hermione wearing the biggest smile he'd ever witnessed. "Do you think that's silly Hermione?"

She slowly and deliberately wrapped her arms around him, her head was beside his as she whispered in Harry's ear. "That's what everyone wants Harry, but I can't think of anyone who deserves to find it more than you."

"So, we okay?"

"Of course we are silly, cultural differences that we talked through. I would never make a liar out of my best friend. Was getting rid of Binns the end of it Harry?"

Harry couldn't shake his head because it was currently nestled very comfortably next to Hermione's, he still had to give a negative answer though. "Both my father and the director see this as nothing more than a few steps on a long road..."

She then asked the question that had been eating away at her for a while, here was Hermione's opening to have it answered. "...but why you Harry? Why do you have to be the one risking yourself to do these things?"

Harry still had her wrapped in his arms, he kept Hermione there as he answered. "That's simple Hermione, because I'm the only one who can. We goblins have been complaining about Binns for generations, that we had to make those complaints to the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures should tell you how successful we were. The boy-who-lived was able to see Binns driven from the castle in a single afternoon. We may not see goblin / wizard relations where we would want them in our lifetime, but our children and their children should benefit from these changes."

Hermione was in Harry's arms, now her favourite place in the entire world. Hearing him say 'our children' just turned her entire insides to mush. She knew he didn't mean it that way but a girl could dream, a certain girl also needed a long talk with her mother first chance she could get.

Harry enjoyed Hermione snuggling into him so continued talking to prolong this condition, he had no idea his best friend would quite happily stay there for the rest of the day. "I can only work on the wizarding attitudes, my father and the director have probably the more difficult task of convincing the rest of our nation better relations with the magical community is something we goblins should want. Of those seven 'goblin rebellions' Binns had built his history course around, two of them were actually started by goblins. What he didn't teach though was that this pair of rebellions were actually put down by the goblin nation, with the guilty being punished. We still have a few goblins who hold on to their hatred every bit as bitterly as Binns - though not after death."

They sat quietly, content just to be holding each other for a few minutes. "You know Padma is going to tease us mercilessly for this?"

Her question drew a chuckle from Harry. "Don't forget Neville, he's getting just as bad. The two of them have Parvati and Lavender almost sick with jealousy by acting like a couple."



"I wonder if Padma's name is on one of those betrothal contracts?"

"I don't know, but it's something I'll have to deal with when I become head of the Potter family. No pureblood would ever accept a rejection of their daughter from a goblin, so that is something I'm going to have to do myself."

"Oh my, I think I would be mortified if you had to reject me."

A moment of silence followed that remark before Harry managed to answer. "I don't think I could do that to you..."

Hermione was once more having trouble breathing with a mouth that would match the Sahara for moisture content, did Harry really just say that? "Do I need to talk to my father about a contract?" She had made the quip only partly in jest.

Harry held her closer as he whispered his answer. "Only if you want to be the same as all the rest."

Both had a rough last few hours and neither wanted to be the one to break their hold. This was how Padma and Neville found them almost half an hour later. Their friends didn't tease, just handed over the food they had brought wrapped in napkins. Eating in the great hall with everyone staring at you was overrated anyway.

-oOoOo-

Barchoke marched down the corridor to the director's office. He didn't have an appointment but also didn't think that would matter today, the letter in his hand was all the appointment he needed.

Once in the director's presence, Barchoke wasted no time in passing on the news - or the letter. "Director, my son has done it!" The pride in his son's achievement practically radiated off Barchoke, if it was possible for a goblin to glow then he managed it.

Ragnok read the letter and his delight matched that of Barchoke. "Bloody Binns' grandson finally ejected from the castle! This is a great day my friend." Even at this early hour, Ragnok shouted for goblin grog to celebrate this famous victory. When both of them had a tankard, Ragnok offered a toast.

"Almost ten years ago I named your son Old Crow because I found it amusing. Like a true goblin, by his achievements he has turned the joke back on me. I find myself having to rename your son, from this day forth he shall be known as Centurion Crow." Ragnok took a deep swig of the potent brew to seal the deal before noticing his drinking companion wasn't reciprocating the toast.

Barchoke was actually down on one knee with his head bowed. "Director, I beg of you, please don't do this. My son faces enough resentment amongst the nation without adding to his burden."

"Do you not think the goblin who rid us of Bloody Binns spawn should be rewarded?"

"Yes director but..."

"...but nothing Barchoke. You have raised a fine son, a proud goblin warrior. His tutors and trainers return glowing reports, you yourself marched proudly into this room to boast of his achievements. His work inside Hogwarts has been exemplary, and raised our profile to heights we never thought possible. I know as a father you want your son to make his own decision and I promise to honour that, but I for one would be happy if he chose to stay with Gringotts."

Barchoke was never so glad to have a tankard of grog in his hand, after hearing that he certainly needed it. He couldn't drink it now though until the director was finished presenting his argument.

"I know your original intention was to have your son taking his place in wizarding society, giving the nation a voice at the very top of their culture - that is still a worthwhile aim. Don't you see though, your son rejecting that life to live amongst us could have just as profound an effect on our community." The head of the goblin nation began listing his reasons for a statement that was every bit as shocking as when Barchoke first proposed Harry Potter being raised as one of them. Both goblins in the room were also aware that one of them had very nearly lost his head that day.

"He has already killed with his blade in combat and righted a historic wrong, he could be every bit as great a hero to our nation as the boy-who-lived is to the wizards. Master Sharpshard thinks that when your son masters his magic, no goblin will be able to stand against him in combat. That in itself is an achievement which deserves to be

rewarded. Now will you stand and toast your son's success with me? We have a ceremony to arrange, let's invite his young friend along and nail our intentions to the wall for all to see."

Barchoke knew one tankard wasn't going to be enough, he would need to write to Harry though before he drank any more. "Director, you do me and my family great honour. Awarding my son this rank, and inviting his friend to the ceremony will certainly start the cart rolling. Here's to smooth track and a safe arrival at the destination we both want." The shocked goblin then drank deeply of the now much-needed brew.

-oOoOo-

Eargit delivered her letter to Harry before popping onto the table beside Hermione, the witch had Moonlight in her lap and the wise bird knew this would mean more scraps. She wasn't disappointed as the first piece of bacon came her way, the young kneazle wasn't in the slightest bit jealous - appearing to know there was plenty available for both familiars.

"A snowy white owl and a jet black cat, they couldn't be more different yet get along fine together. Do you think we can add their example to us four Harry?"

Harry hadn't heard a word, his entire attention riveted to the parchment in his hands. He'd now read the relevant section three times and it still didn't make sense. "WHAT THE..."

"Harry? Is everything all right?"

"I honestly don't know."

"How can you not know?"

"I mean I need a few minutes to figure this out. This is life changing Hermione, and not something you expect with your breakfast on a Thursday morning."

Nothing in Hogwarts could be kept secret and Harry's voice had been loud enough to attract attention. Soon the entire hall knew Harry had received disturbing news from home. Dumbledore sensed an opening so headed over to the Ravenclaw table. If the boy was

upset, he might let something slip. The head of Harry's house followed on right behind the headmaster though.

Albus started with an obvious question to get the boy talking. "Any news of when the new history professor will be arriving at Hogwarts Mr Crow?"

"Tomorrow, and actually it's Centurion Crow."

Filius immediately had his right hand in a clenched fist and placed on his chest above his heart, he then bowed his head to complete the salute. "Well met Centurion Crow, and may I be the first to congratulate you."

With Professor Flitwick congratulating Harry, Hermione's worry meter slipped down about four notches, she was now more confused than concerned. "Centurion, like in the Roman army? Do you now have a hundred goblins under you?"

Harry was still struggling to come to terms with this news so it was left to their head of house to explain. "A centurion is a warrior who, by his actions, has done the goblin nation a great service. He doesn't have warriors under his command as such, though a warrior would obey if a centurion gave a direct order. The nearest thing I can think of to compare it with would be an Order of Merlin - or something like a knighthood in the muggle world. I think Harry will be the youngest ever recipient of this great honour, have they arranged the date of the ceremony yet?"

"My father says it's all in hand. Master Flitwick, can you spare the time to have a meeting before classes start? Hermione should be included to, since she's going to be receiving an invitation from the director to attend the ceremony."

Flitwick's "WHAT!" rivalled that of the headmaster's in their history class for sheer volume of noise, the difference this time was that the entire hall heard and fell silent. Eargit shot into the air and circled above while Hermione comforted Moonlight, both familiars had reacted badly to the loud shout.

"So, me attending this ceremony is not what normally happens? I should be getting used to it by now, hanging around with Harry."

Filius was delighted to see how well the girl was taking this, he needed to let her know just how momentous this was though. "Miss Granger, I think you will be the first witch or wizard ever to attend one of these ceremonies. I myself have never seen one."

Albus was quick to react, he really didn't need more positive attention for the goblins. "If Miss Granger is going to be in any danger, then I'm afraid I can't allow her to attend..."

Dumbledore may have been quick but Harry was lightning. He was on his feet and facing down the headmaster. "Since Hermione has already been attacked twice in your school, I hardly think we need to take safety advice from Albus Dumbledore. When her parents sign the permission form, you have no further say in the matter headmaster. This does not concern you."

Albus knew he had made a terrible mistake, he was currently standing toe to toe with a first year but unbelievably was in deep trouble. While still quick, he was a wizard with well over a century of years under his belt. Young Harry on the other hand had speed to burn with reflexes to match, and Albus had foolishly placed himself in easy range of that deadly knife. Visions of wands lying sliced clean through on that toilet floor sent shivers down the headmaster. The elder wand may be the most powerful of wands, but it was still made of wood and wouldn't survive an encounter with a goblin blade. It was actually Filius who saved the situation escalating to that point, and Albus having to back down from a first year in front of the entire school.

"Miss Granger will be treated with the utmost respect while inside Gringotts, to do otherwise would see the offender pay a very high price. She will be attending as the guest of the director, to even insult her reflects badly on Ragnok - certainly not good for any goblin doing the insulting's health. Add to that, the bracelet she wears tells everyone she is under the protection of a very powerful family." This last fact was news to everyone bar Harry, even Hermione.

Filius explained the bracelet's significance in goblin culture to the entire hall, all of whom were now listening intently. "Professor McGonagall is known for wearing a piece of her clan tartan as part of her robes, the filigree design on the bracelet provides the same function. To a goblin, it's as easy to read as tartan is to a Scot. To

treat Miss Granger with anything less than the respect she deserves would see that goblin incur the wrath of not only the director, but one of the goblin nation's most powerful families too. I agree with Centurion Crow, she will be far safer inside Gringotts than her time at Hogwarts has been."

Albus was forced to accept this, he had no means of refuting any of these claims. The headmaster attempted to at least save some face. "Please arrange for the appropriate paperwork to be in Hogwarts well before this ceremony takes place..."

Harry wasn't prepared to let the headmaster off with even that much. "My father will be contacting Professor McGonagall shortly with all the details, and the completed paperwork. Master Flitwick, my father also wishes to invite you to the ceremony."

It was a delighted head of Ravenclaw who once more gave the centurion salute before leading both of them to his office.

Hermione was on Harry's arm but with Moonlight cradled in her other, they had barely left the hall when she asked the first question. "What just happened in there Harry?"

"Remember I said I had to do this because only I could? I think the director has just changed the rules and now wants me to help change goblin minds too. I want to talk it over with Master Flitwick but I think I'm right. The director inviting you along is the biggest clue. He's deliberately showing me choosing Gringotts doesn't mean I would lose my friends, and publicly throwing his backing behind that. This ceremony also very publicly places the director behind me being considered a goblin. A centurion is something every goblin warrior dreams of becoming, I just can't believe it's happening to me."

Hermione wasn't too troubled by this news. "I've already told you Harry, if you leave then I'm coming too. I haven't seen anything since our first night in Hogwarts that would make me want to change my mind. Considering you didn't even get house points for saving us from that troll, I would say you deserve this - except I'm beginning to think this centurion thing is even bigger than I first thought."

Filius was also running the facts through his mind, and coming to the same conclusion as Harry. If this came down to a tug-o-war between

the two cultures, the poor boy's eventual decision had just become an impossible one.

-oOoOo-

Bill could tell the gloves were now off, Harry's news had inserted a touch of panic into the headmaster's manipulations. "Albus, you have to understand I was not the only person considered for this job, this is a fantastic opportunity for me. What you're asking would finish my career if word ever got back."

"My boy, what you fail to see are the wider implications we're dealing with here. Transfiguration is changing as Minerva becomes more and more enchanted with the goblin method of performing this task. Your defence classes are coveted nearly as much as those private potions lessons that are taught by a goblin. Tomorrow, we have a new history professor who will introduce a new course, both course and professor are bought and paid for by the goblins."

Albus followed this up with an impassioned plea. "They are using Harry's influence, and the Potter gold, to undermine our society in a way that's just as dangerous as any dark lord. Their influence has now spread over four of our seven core subjects - five if you count Filius teaching charms - and I need to know what their intentions are. Surely there is something you can tell me?"

"I can tell you they want Voldemort gone, something I know we both agree with."

Albus only nodded and let the silence draw out, wanting more information than that. His patience was finally rewarded.

"They also have a plan concerning the school that I think you should be part of, I was told no. They suspect that there may be a horcrux hidden inside Hogwarts, Harry's hoping his status as her champion will help him find it. If he discovers one, my job is to safely transport it to Gringotts..."

"If you discover one, I want to examine it."

"Sorry Albus, my instructions are implicit. Protect Harry at all costs, and get any horcrux to Gringotts immediately. The goblins have a

procedure to deal with these things so you can rely on them to do it safely."

"Do you know if they have destroyed any more?"

"I was told about the one that had been inside Harry, nothing specific outwith that. I do know they have a small team dedicated to researching and then running down any leads on these abominations. At the moment, that team's best guess at a horcrux location is Hogwarts."

It wasn't much but at least he would be told if a horcrux was removed from Hogwarts. Now that he had breached the wall of William's defences, the next piece of information should come easier. Soon, he would know everything that the goblins trusted their curse-breaker with. If it became necessary to expose that information to others, William would make a fine defence professor when the goblins threw him out. He would even have accommodation in the castle, and away from his mother. After receiving a howler from Molly when she found out Voldemort was in the castle, Albus thought getting out of the Burrow would surely be a plus point for the young man taking the job.

-oOoOo-

The new history professor wasn't a wizard but Harry didn't think Draco would be complaining. Professor Hobson wasn't a goblin - or even a centaur, she was a five foot six Swedish blonde in her mid/late-twenties. Her face and figure were such that the seventh year males were considering if dropping grades on their other subjects might be worth it to be in a classroom with the hottest witch in Hogwarts. No, Draco would certainly not be complaining about the latest goblin import to the castle.

A/N your response to my last chapter was just - WOW! I do actually strive to make my stories 'different' and I was really pleased to see my ideas so well received. Thanks for reading.



## Chapter 15

With Halloween being on a Thursday, the ceremony where Harry would officially become Centurion Crow was scheduled for the following day. Knowing how much pressure his son had actually been under in his two months at Hogwarts, Barchoke made arrangements for Harry and Hermione to be out of the castle that weekend too.

The educator in McGonagall had originally balked at the idea of a pair of first years missing so many classes, forcing Harry to tell her the reason behind needing Halloween away from Hogwarts too. After that, It was a teary-eyed Deputy Headmistress who immediately signed the paperwork.

They stayed for Astronomy class on the Wednesday evening so didn't leave until after breakfast on Thursday morning, Padma was hugging both of them goodbye before Professor Flitwick escorted them to the edge of Hogwarts wards. Harry's portkey then took the pair, plus Moonlight riding in her carrying basket, to Gringotts.

-oOoOo-

Harry so wanted to hug his father, Hermione had gotten him addicted to this most un-goblinlike of behaviour. "Well met father, I'm delighted to see you again."

"Well met my son, and of course you too Miss Granger. It does these old eyes good to see you both looking so well."

"Oh sir, I think I'm more excited over this than Harry is, it's really great to see you again too."

The sincerity in her words shone through and had the goblin smiling with delight, it was time to get down to business though. "We have quite a lot to accomplish today so I need to get started by letting you know our itinerary. First, we all have an appointments with the tailors for something appropriate to wear tomorrow. Then our trip to Godric's Hollow, followed by a journey to Crawley."

Hermione's excitement was reaching hyperventilating proportions. "We're going to see my mum and dad?"

"Yes, Harry and I have something we need to take care of but you also have a task to do at home."

Hermione had developed and refined her method of dealing with what she called the goblin need to know principle - they never told you anything if they could help it - she only had to look at Harry and raise an eyebrow for him to offer an explanation.

"Best guess, my father has arranged protection wards on your home. You will need to be there as the warders require someone magical to tie the protection to. I'll tell you about the other trip when I get back. I don't know what I'm going to find and have no intention of letting it spoil our day. My father and I will be perfectly safe so you don't have to worry."

"I thought it was supposed to be me who knew you well?"

Their interplay had Barchoke smiling, but still ushering them out his office. They really did have a lot to do, and he was certainly not looking forward to this afternoon.

-oOoOo-

Since the first of September, Hermione had felt as if she'd dropped straight into one of her favourite books, though this was her own personal version - through the looking glass, and what Hermione found there. This morning had been pure Cinderella - she had felt like a princess as the seamstresses fussed over her and the young witch was amazed by the choices they helped her with - material, colour, style, etc.

Now Hermione was being smacked in the face with the harsh reality of the life she had chosen. Standing there as Harry introduced her to his parents at their graveside was in one way uplifting and yet utterly heartbreaking at the same time. Both his parents had been only twenty one when they were murdered, and Hermione didn't know what to make of the inscription on their headstone - The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.

She stood there trying to be a good friend while Harry talked of meeting her on the express and all their adventures to date. He was always modest when describing his actions in these events, and when saying the goblin nation was honouring him by awarding the

rank of centurion. He told his mum about their classes, while saying to his father he'd enjoyed his first flight on a broom but had yet to see a quidditch match. Hermione's heart was breaking for her best friend, she so couldn't wait to hug her parents and tell her mum and dad she loved them both.

-oOoOo-

The portkey had barely set the group down in her enclosed back garden and Hermione was already running, racing through the French doors while shouting for her parents. It was a smiling Harry who picked up Moonlight's basket and followed his father in the direction his best friend had shot off.

They soon came across all three Grangers sharing a needy and tearful hug. Harry felt as if they were intruding until Hermione broke away from her parents and was quickly dragging him over to meet them.

"Mum, dad, this is Harry."

Hermione was in her usual position of being on Harry's left arm so he had to sit Moonlight's carrier down to offer her father his hand. "Pleased to meet you sir."

While Dan was noticing how firm this young lad's handshake was, and just how comfortable his daughter appeared on his arm, Harry was getting his first close look at Hermione's parents. He would place both about late thirties with her father easily qualifying for the tall, dark and handsome tag that he'd heard some of the witches bandying about in Hogwarts. That those remarks were aimed at him went right over his head. Harry also thought Emma Granger was a stunningly beautiful woman, politely and sincerely saying so as he kissed the back of her hand.

Emma Granger couldn't believe her first look at Hermione's best friend. His dark suit appeared as it had been hand-made by the best that Savile Row had to offer, though it's cut could hardly be considered traditional. His snow-white shirt was impeccably matched by a pearl grey waistcoat and cravat, crossed by a sash that held a bejewelled but obviously deadly sword. The long jet black hair framing those unbelievable green eyes made for quite the ensemble, she could now understand Hermione's claims that other

witches were throwing themselves at him. Gazing into those mesmerising eyes almost took her breath away as Harry kissed the back of her hand, claiming it was now easy to see from where Hermione inherited her beauty. Her daughter giggling was a wonderful sound that both Granger parents wanted to hear a lot more of, and broke the spell Emma was falling under.

"Oh my, he's quite the charmer Hermione."

This produced a full-blown laugh from her daughter. "The thing is mum, Harry doesn't even know he's doing it. Harry's just being sincere."

Hermione was bending down to get the newest member of the Granger family out her basket when her parents caught sight of her bracelet. "Jesus! Hermione, you weren't kidding about your present being beautiful."

"Oh I know mum, isn't Moonlight just gorgeous?"

Dan and Emma were both delighted their daughter valued her kitten over the golden bracelet, and were looking forward to hearing their stories over a lunch that was already prepared. Watching the two kids interact at the table, they fond themselves agreeing with Barchoke. Harry certainly brought the best out of Hermione.

Their daughter was sitting with Moonlight on her lap, scraps of food would find their way to the kitten, as Hermione's constant chatter and wide smile lit up the room. They had thought her letters were written by a different girl but here was the daughter both parents had always known was inside, all it had needed was some friends to bring this happy and contented version of Hermione to the fore.

Soon Barchoke had to offer their apologies, he and Harry had an appointment that couldn't be broken. All three parents watched as their children hugged each other, Barchoke promising that they would be back later. The warders were also due within the hour to begin their work securing the Granger home.

Hermione watched Harry and his father disappear and both her parents heard her sigh. Dan went to clear up after lunch, knowing Emma wanted a chance to talk to their not so little girl.

-oOoOo-

It was a long time since Sirius Black had enjoyed lunch, it was now a decade since Sirius had enjoyed anything. Today was the tenth anniversary of the worst day of his life, the day his entire world turned to shit. It was therefore a great shock when he heard the guard approaching and then his cell door creaked open.

"Move it Black, some goblins here to see you on family business. I thought you were the last of your evil tribe."

Sirius wondered if Lucius was trying to get his hands on the Black fortune again? He must be getting desperate, sending goblins to Azkaban now. His only happy thought was his iron-clad will that left everything to his godson, neither the Malfoys nor the ministry would get a Knut of that money.

He was led into the visitor room and sat in the chair, chains soon had him secured before the guard left. A pair of goblins then entered from another door and sat in front of him. One of the goblins had his hood raised and face hidden while the other did the talking.

"Good afternoon sir, we were wondering if you could answer some questions for us?"

"Well it's not like I had anything else planned for today. You've came all this way to see me so I'll do my best."

Sirius then felt as if all the oxygen had been sucked out of the room. The other 'goblin' had lowered his hood and the marauder found himself pierced by a familiar pair of angry green eyes. The last time Sirius had looked into a pair of angry green eyes exactly like those was after he had bought his godson a broom for his first birthday - Lily threatened to castrate Padfoot if Harry hurt himself.

"You can start Mr Black by telling us why you betrayed my parents to that bastard Voldemort?"

-oOoOo-

Hermione was pacing up and down the kitchen, with her gaze fixed on the back garden. Their house was now warded but Harry still hadn't returned as evening was falling, and Hermione's anxiety was

mounting with every minute that passed. Her mum and dad were trying to get her to sit but the feeling that something had happened just wouldn't go away.

Moonlight was currently positioned on Emma's lap, having taken to both her owner's parents instantly. Her mother was stroking the purring kitten while trying to get Hermione to calm down. "Harry will arrive when he gets here, you walking up and down won't make it happen any faster. He's with his father and said they wouldn't be in any danger."

"Mum, danger just has a way of sneaking up on Harry. He never goes looking for trouble, it usually finds him...oh shit - Harry!"

The pair had portkeyed into the back garden and it appeared as if his father was holding Harry up, Dan moved swiftly to help Barchoke get his son into the house. Hermione stood there almost frozen in shock until Harry spotted her and managed to say 'Hermione', she sprang right to him and both were soon a tangle of arms. The two fathers got Harry into a chair and Hermione parked herself on his lap, her best friend was sobbing his heart out and she had no intention of moving anywhere else until he was okay.

The three parents were left to stand there as Hermione comforted a Harry who'd clearly had some kind of emotional breakdown. Barchoke was looking on in anguish, feeling as if he'd failed his son. "I had no idea how to deal with Harry's reaction but your daughter seemed to know exactly what to do. I can't thank you or Hermione enough for this."

Emma watched as their daughter sat on a boy's lap and whispered in his ear, that the same boy was holding on to her as if his life depended on it gave some idea of just how much these two had come to depend on each other. She was so glad of having the chance to talk with Hermione, and relieved she had time to pass that information on to her husband while their daughter was assisting with the wards.

Hermione's revelation that Harry wouldn't even consider a girlfriend until this nutter was no longer after him had eased Dan's worries. All three parents already had a fair idea who Harry would be turning to when that time came. Emma's advice to her daughter was to be Harry's best friend, and anything more that she wanted would

perhaps follow later. Emma hoped it would be years later but children seemed to grow up faster with every passing generation.

She asked Barchoke the obvious question. "What happened?"

"It's a very long story Emma, and one you will hear in great detail, but let's wait until Harry feels up to telling his part of it. My son has just had the biggest shock of his life. I have seen him physically battered and bruised yet not a tear was shed, this just reminded me he still has a bit of growing to do. I have gotten used to treating him like an adult but he is only eleven - and today that showed."

Having Hermione in his arms was allowing Harry to regain control of his emotions. Harry had built his drive to excel on a foundation of three life goals, three reasons he must train, study and be at his best so he could achieve his aims. These trio of absolutes were the force that gave Harry the strength to get back up in a fight when his body was screaming enough, what gave him the drive and determination to succeed on his mission at Hogwarts.

He was determined to prove his 'family' wrong for discarding him out of hand, his greatest wish was to one day confront them. In his book, a child being magical was not a good enough reason to throw that child away. His father was a different species and, in his own way, loved him very much. Goblins worshiped their children and Harry had been raised as a goblin, so his abandonment at his relatives' hands was a scar that went really deep.

Secondly, he needed to see Voldemort gone forever. Even without the prophecy, this would have been one of his main goals. Revenge was a concept that spanned many cultures but Harry considered it more a case of delayed justice. Voldemort had killed his parents, and would be coming back to try for him again. Seeing this monster gone forever was something that had to be done, and, according to the prophecy, only he could do it.

Thirdly, Harry desperately wanted to look the wizard in the eye that had betrayed his parents and ask him why - before spitting in the bastard's face. Today he thought he would accomplish one of those aims, only to discover it was the wrong man held in Azkaban.

This had badly shaken those painstakingly constructed foundations, and Harry didn't know how to deal with the situation he now found

himself in. When Harry began to speak, it was to Hermione he addressed himself. The three parents just sat and listened, almost forgotten about by their children.

"Hermione, I have hated someone for as long as I can remember. I took delight and comfort from the fact he was locked away in the toughest prison on the planet. No punishment was too harsh for this person, no suffering too great. Today, my father and I went to Azkaban to confront this criminal..." Hermione's gasp of shock saw Harry falter for a moment, it also allowed Barchoke to quietly explain to her parents just what Azkaban was.

Hermione now holding Harry even tighter at the mention of that foul place gave him the strength to continue. "I found an innocent man Hermione, I found family I didn't know I had. I found a godfather, a godfather who even after ten years in Azkaban still loves me... How could I be so wrong? What else in my life am I totally wrong about? I don't know what to do next Hermione?"

His best friend instinctively understood what the problem was here, Harry's very beliefs had just taken a massive hit. There was also the fact that another person said they loved him, apparently not something goblins were noted for saying to each other. Hermione had come to understand Harry very well, and thought she knew what to say to help her best friend. "Love him back Harry, that's all you can do. If he really loves you, then that's all he would want. Let the adults work on how to get him out of there, you can't do any more at the moment."

Harry was crying again, but this time it seemed different. Gone were the distraught, heart-wrenching sobs, this was more like a welcome release. As they watched Hermione once more work her soothing magic on her best friend, Dan needed to know something from Barchoke.

"Is this man really innocent?"

"We have searched for years, attempting to unearth information on Sirius Black - the man who betrayed Harry's parents. That we couldn't find any surprised us, the ministry aren't usually that efficient at keeping secrets, and left us with no option but to approach the source. Sirius' claims that he never had a trial or was even questioned answers our lack of records problem. With his



permission, we were able to access the Black vaults. Harry is indeed his godson, and sole heir to the Black title and fortune."

Emma couldn't get her head around this development. "How could an innocent man end up in prison - without even a trial?"

"Powerful figures wanted him there Emma, that was all it took. The man was in tears, claiming he had let down his godson. He was at Harry's parents home that night after the attack, and wanted to take baby Harry with him. Dumbledore already had plans in place and Sirius was denied his legal right. Instead, he went after the real betrayer but was caught before he could kill the traitor. Sirius was again denied his legal rights, he awoke in Azkaban and has been there for the last ten years. Harry then tried to comfort Sirius by giving him a quick overview of his own life, before becoming distraught with himself that we hadn't taken any action earlier..."

-oOo- earlier -oOo-

"Harry, you had to stay hidden - I completely understand and agree with that. I see a wonderful young man before me, and that makes me feel better than I have in many years. Your father has done a fantastic job raising you..."

"Sirius, I'm now head of the Potter family, I can use that to get you out..."

Sirius saw the Potter ring appear on his godson's finger. "Not without ending the escrow agreement that keeps you protected, I don't want that. How did you slip that one past the ministry anyway?"

"We placed the documents in a bundle of goblin complaints against the ministry, and filed them with the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. We have a signed receipt and the ninety days the ministry - or anyone else - had to object has now passed..."

"That is so sneaky, I love it. Please listen to me, you couldn't have registered those papers before your eleventh birthday, so the ninety days must have just passed this week. You couldn't have come here any quicker even if you wanted to."

Harry started sobbing then, knowing what he had come here to do. Confront his parents' betrayer and spit in Sirius Black's face.

"Listen to me Harry, knowing you are safe and well will allow me to survive in here. Yes I want out, but not at any cost to the only person in the world who means anything to me."

They heard the guard returning and Harry flew to hug his chained godfather, his father was left to pull his son's hood up and stop Harry attacking the guard as the idiot berated and manhandled Sirius out the room.

-oOo- present -oOo-

Dan had a query. "Are you saying all Harry had to do was pull his hood up and he could waltz right through a maximum security prison?"

"I was clearly a goblin, and chatting with my companion in our own language. I told you, to them goblins are only a small step up from Moonlight there. Yes there was certainly a chance we may have been discovered, that's why we couldn't make the trip any sooner. Until Harry went to Hogwarts, no one but Dumbledore knew where he was. I got Harry back to Gringotts, we were already sure Sirius was telling the truth but confirmation saw me having to bring Harry here in that state."

Emma was focusing on another issue. "You said Harry was now head of the Potter family, does that mean he's made his decision?"

"What I want for my son is that he, and he alone, has the power to make that decision. This was crucial in that our greatest fear was the ministry or Dumbledore would find - or even invent - some legal loophole to tear Harry away from me. The escrow agreement means he's considered property until he reaches the age of seventeen, or the head of the Potter family decrees otherwise. Since that is now Harry, he has the power to end it at any point he so chooses. At the moment though, this would have the effect of throwing him to the wolves. He has trained hard and studied even harder for what he knew was awaiting him at Hogwarts. Harry has neither the knowledge nor experience to handle being an adult wizard. He needs time to grow, physically and emotionally before that decision really becomes a viable one."

"So this was more about stopping anyone else forcing that decision on him?"

"Exactly Emma, we want to keep this information secret for as long as possible. I don't want Harry jumping into anything and getting some short-term gain, but losing in the long run. Sirius picked up on that aspect at once, which was why he didn't want Harry rushing out and declaring himself head of the Potter family to help."

"Will he have to deal with this sack load of betrothal contracts now?"

Barchoke's eyebrows shot up at that. "He told Hermione about them?"

Emma was confused at the surprise, you could almost say shock, her question had been greeted with. "Yes, is there something wrong with that?"

"Oh no, it's just the level of trust between them that shocked me." On seeing Emma visibly confused, Barchoke attempted to explain. "That a parent would offer their daughter in marriage to someone they had never even met - for financial gain - is as disgusting to goblins as I can see it is to you. Goblins could never treat their children like property."

He then continued quickly, knowing the irregularity in that statement and noticing Dan had clearly picked up on. "Had Harry been born a goblin, an escrow agreement would never have been possible. I only suggested it to protect Harry from an orphanage, my intention was always to adopt and raise him as my son. When Harry publicly declares himself as head of House Potter, one of his first tasks will be to reject each and every one of those contracts. They are something that he is deeply embarrassed by, which was why I was so surprised he mentioned them to Hermione."

The parents had been chatting in voices that were barely above a whisper because Harry and Hermione had become very quiet, a closer inspection showed that they had fallen asleep in each others arms.

Emma couldn't help herself. "Ah, don't they look cute!"

This led to her husband shaking his head but making an offer to Barchoke anyway. "I really don't want to disturb them and Harry is welcome to stay here tonight. You could pick them both up in the morning?"

"Tomorrow is a very big day for Harry, he really needs to be rested. I think staying here would certainly help with that." Barchoke then had a question of his own. "Would you mind if I made them more comfortable?"

Emma quickly agreed and then both Grangers watched in amazement as the chair slowly transformed into a very comfortable looking sofa. The transformation was so slow and gentle, neither of the kids woke as their sleeping position changed. Both were now lying on the sofa though they never released their grip on each other throughout.

A cushion became a blanket that tucked both of them in before Barchoke wished everyone a good night.

Emma came from the kitchen with two cups of tea to see Dan watching over the sleeping pair. She handed him his cup while expressing her surprise. "You're taking this much better than I thought. I half expected you getting the guns out to chase Harry off, not sitting there watching some boy sleeping with your daughter."

He knew his wife was teasing but Dan still decided to answer. "First of all, this is not some boy - this is Hermione's best friend. Furthermore, they are sleeping and did I mention he was eleven?"

This earned Dan a kiss from his wife, who was still teasing. "Why don't you just admit you like the boy?"

"Oh he had you eating out of his hand within minutes, handsome and charming was just two descriptions I heard as I cleared the lunch dishes away. I will admit the boy is polite, courteous and has impeccable taste in females - he had you swooning and clearly adores Hermione. Let's not forget he placed himself between nine bullies and our little girl, I'm trying my hardest to forget all about trolls."

Emma held the silence and Dan finally cracked. "Ok, I like the boy - satisfied?"

"I just wanted to make sure we were on the same page, I think they're adorable together. I wondered about Barchoke's comment that these two would be part of each other's lives for years, having seen them today I agree one hundred percent - and approve more than I can say. When have you ever seen our daughter happier, and one of her other friends will be coming for Christmas too. I really can't wait and want to spend as much time with them as possible."

This had Dan thinking. "Neither Harry nor Padma celebrate Christmas, I think we should go all-out to make their first Christmas as memorable as possible."

Christmas was Emma's favourite time of the year so that got a big yes from her. They watched as the kids moved to get more comfortable on the conjured sofa, at no point did they release their hold on each other. This actually drew a smile from Dan.

"Hermione has always been a girl who loved her hugs, it would appear she's found a best friend who thinks the same way."

Emma had more to add to that observation. "Harry had his first hug on the train to Hogwarts. Hermione said this was a cultural difference Harry was happy to adopt, apparently goblins don't do hugs. That's probably why his father brought him here, Barchoke possibly knew what Harry needed but didn't know how to go about it."

This confused Dan. "How is that possible..."

Emma cut right in. "Hermione says the four friends come across differences like that every day. They've learned it doesn't make someone right or wrong - just different."

"She really is growing in to a young lady..."

His wife cut in again. "...a beautiful young lady who's already well into her first crush. That the subject of this crush is lying on our new sofa snuggling into our daughter means the next few years will be interesting. There is one thing I'm already sure of, that young man there will never break her heart..."

This time it was Dan's turn to butt in. Here though was the protective father Emma had been expecting. "...he bloody better not - or he'll need to deal with me."

-oOoOo-

Hogwarts was recovering from its Halloween celebrations and normal service was slowly being resumed at breakfast. The conversations were swaying between the upcoming quidditch match and the beautiful new history professor - the new course was only mentioned at the Ravenclaw table. All that stopped when the Prophet was delivered, the headline alone was enough to account for that.

Boy-who-lived opens his heart to the Prophet.

Exclusive interview and picture.

They did indeed have a picture of Harry, with Hermione of course on his arm. The flowers in his hand were assumed to be for her.

There then followed a list of questions and answers that most in the castle recognised the truth of, that was until Padma grabbed a copy and made for the staff table.

"Professor Flitwick, this is a load of rubbish. Harry would never talk to that rag, he won't even read it."

"I am inclined to agree with you Miss Patil, but that picture is undoubtably Mr Crow and Miss Granger - and most of us recognise some truth in the article."

She was joined by an angry Neville who defended his friends just as stoutly. "Padma and I know what Harry and Hermione had planned yesterday. It's just not possible for this interview to have taken place."

"All this supposed interview goes on about is how happy Harry is at Hogwarts - where does it say he had to fight a troll and provide three of his own tutors?"

Neville totally agreed with Padma on this point. "It also never mentions the fact that Harry is out of school to become Centurion Crow, something he would be sure to talk about in any interview.

Severus had been keeping his head low, observing rather than objecting. The boy's takedown of Binns had been pure Slytherin in the way it was handled, the foundation named after his mother supporting a new history course had also grudgingly won the potion master's respect. This interview in today's Prophet was more like the behaviour he had expected from James Potter's spawn. Severus was head of Slytherin though, so decided to act like one.

"How can you be so sure of that Mr Longbottom?"

Neville and Padma shared a long look. They may be breaking a confidence of Harry's but this interview made their friend seem like an arrogant arsehole. Their decision was made.

"His father was taking him to visit his mum and dad's grave. This is something they do regularly, and Harry spends his time telling his parents what's been happening with him since his last visit. He invited Hermione along and those flowers will be laid on his mum and dad's graves. This is something Harry would never allow the Prophet anywhere near. I don't know how they got this information and picture but I'm certain Harry knew nothing about it."

Professor McGonagall then stood and confirmed what her young lion had just said. "I was aware of where Mr Crow and Miss Granger were yesterday, and totally agree with Mr Longbottom. Harry's father would never allow the Prophet anywhere near his son, and especially not with yesterday being the anniversary of his parents murder. Knowing that family as I do, I expect their retaliation to be swift and brutal. I would hate to be the one who leaked Mr Crow's whereabouts to the press."

Padma didn't see McGonagall's gaze settle on Dumbledore, she was too busy staring at the newspaper in her hands. "I think it's time this newspaper was treated as the rubbish it is.." She began to physically rip the Prophet to shreds.

Severus got in before anyone else could. "Miss Patil, I will not sit here and watch you throw rubbish all over the floor. One point from Ravenclaw." The Head of Slytherin then banished his own copy

before returning to eat his breakfast. Severus Snape had made his decision. Harry Crow was the son of the best friend he ever, or would ever have. That the boy's father was James Potter could be conveniently ignored.

Filius thought he was going to have to argue with Severus again, his one point deduction and then banishing his own copy of this 'rubbish' saw the diminutive charms master smile. He banished the copy of the Prophet that was sitting in front of him - noticing staff along the table were following suit.

Albus watched while copies of today's Prophet began disappearing from all four house tables as students took the view that the story was wrong, or at least not an interview freely given. He had hoped that this would alienate the boy amongst his peers but the actions of his friends put paid to that. Thankfully the rest of wizarding Britain would eat it up and believe every word of it. Albus was forced to respond to the quite blatant attempt to have Harry choose a goblin way of life, that just couldn't be allowed to happen.

-oOoOo-

Dan was first down in the morning, and couldn't find either Hermione or Harry. He had raced upstairs and just woken Emma when both of them heard the front door open. As laughter flowed up the stairs, they quickly headed back down and weren't sure how to react with what they found. Both kids were dressed in exercise clothes and were flushed as if they had been for a run. Hermione was currently swinging a wooden practice sword about while Harry had a wicked looking knife in his hand. That knife was passing up and down their sweeping brush, a brush that morphed into a sword to match Hermione's.

"Morning mum, dad, I didn't think you would be up this early. We've just done our morning run and now going to practice with swords in the back garden, Harry's been teaching me."

This surprised Dan as much as anything he'd seen since discovering their daughter was a witch, the fact that she was magical seemed easier to believe than Hermione exercising. "Do you do this every morning?"



"We run every morning to warm up but Harry has us doing different training every day. At the weekend we just run, Professor Weasley works us hard at our extra defence lessons."

Emma was every bit as shocked as her husband. "Barchoke said you could perform magic at home because the wards would mask it, can you show us what you're learning?"

Quick as a flash, Hermione's wand was in her hand and Dan was hit with a leg locker hex. That this was followed by a tickling jinx had both parents laughing. Dan because of the jinx and Emma who thought it was hilarious to watch him laugh and try to maintain his balance at the same time.

Hermione soon ended both curses and her wand disappeared back up her sleeve. "Professor Weasley provided the three of us with wrist holders for our wands, Harry already had one for his knife. It only takes a flick of my wrist and my wand is ready for action, those were two of the mildest curses we're learning."

Her father couldn't disguise his pride. That Hermione was not only exercising but learning to defend herself were massive pluses to Dan. That her best friend was responsible for these changes also weighed heavily in Harry's favour, and would see the lad receive a warm welcome whenever he appeared at the Grangers.

Emma switched her attention to the young man who was in such distress last night. "How are you feeling today Harry?"

"A lot better Emma, Hermione has a way of getting me to look at things from a different angle. I now have a godfather, that he's in prison is just about what I've come to expect from my life. I also know my father will be looking for a way to get Sirius out of there, and my father is one very smart goblin. If he's not out of Azkaban by Christmas, I'm sure he'll be able to get us back in to see Sirius again over the holidays."

Talking about his father almost seemed to summon him as Barchoke portkeyed into the back garden a couple of hours earlier than they were expecting. He marched right up to Harry and handed over a copy of today's Prophet. There followed an immediate stream of words in the goblin language.

"English please son."

"Sorry father, but if I repeated that in English, Hermione would brain me with that practice sword."

He may actually have gotten away with it as Hermione's full attention was taken up by the paper in front of her. "How did they get this? We never posed for any picture, and Harry certainly never gave an interview. This makes him out to be as arrogant as Malfoy?"

"As soon as we arrived, I erected wards around that part of the graveyard so we wouldn't be disturbed. No one could have gotten through them without the wards alerting me. We thought some kind of recording quill but that doesn't explain the photograph, I was never more than ten yards away from you two so it has me stumped."

Harry though was coming at the problem from a different direction. "Someone must have told this Skeeter woman we would be there yesterday, I hardly think they just staked out the cemetery on the off-chance we may appear."

It was a delighted and proud goblin who answered his son. "Of course you are right, we suspect Dumbledore set the entire thing up. He squeezed where you would be on Halloween out of Curse-breaker Weasley, who of course reported this to us at once. We certainly didn't think it would lead to anything like today's Prophet. The director is treating this article as a deliberate attack against Gringotts, it can be no coincidence that this comes out the day you are to become the youngest centurion in history - and your supposed interview makes no mention of it. Our legal team are meeting with the Prophet right now."

Dan was extremely unhappy at seeing his daughter plastered all over the front page of what was effectively a national newspaper. "What are you hoping to achieve?"

"They will print a full retraction and reveal how they got this information."

That sounded fine in principle but newspapers were very reluctant to call themselves liars, and even more so to reveal sources. "Do you think they will?"

Barchoke answered with a question of his own. "What would happen if your bank suddenly decided they wouldn't support your business, and wanted all the money back they had lent you? Add to that you wouldn't be able to use the bank to pay your staff salaries, or pay for supplies to keep your business running. Oh, and you can't take your account to another bank - since there isn't one!"

There really was only one answer Dan could give. "We would be ruined, but why would you do that?"

"The director looks on this as a political attack on Gringotts, a deliberate attempt to discredit one of our subjects. Centurion Crow here extolling the virtues of Hogwarts, and the wizarding world in general, will do massive damage to Harry's standing in our nation. This whole thing has Dumbledore's stamp all over it, our reaction must be swift and severe."

Emma was stunned at how much power the goblins actually wielded in the magical world. "Why don't wizards have their own bank? No offence intended Barchoke, but how can it make sense to have all their eggs in the one basket - or all their gold in your bank?"

"You are right Emma but pureblood wizards are inherently lazy. For generations, a flick or swish from their wand has gotten them whatever they wanted, they always take the easy option. Even their favourite sport is played sitting on a broom, hardly physically taxing. Harry and Hermione exercise every day but both their pureblood friends think they are crazy for doing so, because that's the way they have been raised to think. While Gringotts certainly employs a few witches and wizards, they never get to work on the financial side of the bank. Why should we train people who could one day replace us?"

This left the mother shaking her head. "Hermione told us there were cultural differences between all four friends but it takes some getting used to. Do you really think this newspaper will print an apology and the truth?"

Hermione had something to add to that conversation. "Well, if there's going to be another picture, I want to be in it. I look like some gormless village idiot in this one, Harry though is very handsome."

Hermione did indeed have a different way of looking at things and it generated a smile amongst those gathered there that morning. It was time for breakfast, preparations for the ceremony and then crushing a newspaper - unless they printed the truth. Just a normal day for Harry Crow.

-oOoOo-

Hermione's views on the picture were shared by a young redhead at the Burrow. Ginny couldn't wait to get the newspaper up to her bedroom and take a pair of scissors to that picture. She intended to cut so that only her handsome Harry would be left, with flowers in his hand for her of course. Ginny was also counting the days to Christmas and knew she would be getting her present early this year. What gift could possibly compare to her meeting Harry Crow?

A/N thanks for reading.

## Chapter 16

Hermione was back through the looking glass again, at least that's what it felt like. She was clothed in pure white silk and the material flowed over her form like layers of liquid. Her robe was high at the neck and down to her ankles with a violet sash around her waist providing the only colour. That wasn't quite true though, apart from her gold bracelet, Barchoke had loaned her jewellery that belonged to his late wife. A golden necklace that had the same filigree design was almost like chainmail armour as it spread over her chest and the diamond tiara she wore was so beautiful, it wouldn't look out of place in the Tower of London beside the British Crown Jewels.

She was walking beside Barchoke down an aisle that had seating for about five hundred on either side, they were the main guests of honour and had to make their way to the very front. She could hear the murmurings as they walked to their assigned seats and, thanks to Professor Flitwick, Hermione could actually understand them.

Rowena Ravenclaw had invented a spell that allowed a witch or wizard to communicate with goblins, Helena had taught this now forgotten spell to the Head of Ravenclaw so Hermione could understand what was happening here today. It would have been considered the height of bad manners to be translating while another goblin was speaking, this solved the problem of Hermione not having a clue about what was being said.

Hermione thought the part of the bank that did business with the public was rather grand while those areas unseen, behind the scenes so to speak, were fairly spartan. There was no decoration, no paintings, tapestries or even pictures - just plain stone walls. The place where the Centurion Ceremony would be held blew all her goblins being a utilitarian race theories out the window.

The room was oval in shape with a domed ceiling, and Hermione couldn't spot a square inch of this massive cathedral-like hall that wasn't covered in at least one form of artwork. Some of this artwork appeared to be exquisitely carved directly into and out of the stone - with sculpture blending seamlessly into paintings. Add to that the effects created by flickering lighting being beautifully and creatively incorporated into each tableaux - carved goblins holding smokeless flaming torches and even a fire breathing dragon painting / sculpture - and it created the impression you could walk directly into some of

the scenes. In any culture, art of this diversity and quality would have been considered beautiful. Given the starkness of its surrounding rooms and corridors, it was breathtaking.

That most of these scenes depicted goblins battling foes or fierce creatures Hermione thought was to be expected from a race of warriors. From her seat beside Barchoke in the front row, she had an uninterrupted view of the raised stage that filled this end of the oval hall / cathedral.

There was a throne-like carved granite seat in the centre of the marble stage, with about another forty seats - in two banks of twenty - facing not into the audience but the lone seat in the middle. Hermione found herself sitting between Harry's father and Master Pitslay - she could hardly miss that Master Sharpshard was also sitting in the front row. She pitied the poor goblin who ended up sitting behind the massive master of the blade, Hermione didn't think they would be asking him to move though.

The sound of drumming reverberated through the now packed hall / cathedral and that was the signal for everyone to stand. The drumming was caused by goblin warriors banging their swords and axes off their shields and was in time to them marching down the aisle. They came to a halt as the lead goblins reached the front before performing a complex marching manoeuvre. This saw the warriors alined either side of the aisle, but now with each line facing the other. The drumming stopped as, with a loud cheer, all the warriors raised their weapons in salute.

An imposing goblin that Hermione took to be Director Ragnok walked down the centre of this salute. He was clad in body armour that was decorative and ceremonial but certainly still appeared sturdy enough to fulfil its primary function - and carrying the wickedest looking battleaxe she'd ever seen. Considering there were at least a hundred on display here today, Hermione now felt she had a basis for making such a judgement. Marching behind the director were the existing centurions and two things immediately struck the young witch. Harry could have his age trebled and he would still be the youngest centurion, the other thing was more in the form of a question, a question she would ask Barchoke later. Hermione wanted to know if the goblins had copied the Roman armies, or if the most successful troops the world had ever known had based themselves on the goblins?

The centurions wore tunics much like the one Harry did for exercising but these had strips of dragon hide that acted almost like a kilt. All tunics were festooned with goblin steel and she supposed the epaulettes signified their rank. They all had golden bands around their upper arms that, as she had come to expect, were intricately carved. Though able to understand and speak the language, Hermione again was left longing for 'the idiot's guide to goblins'. There was just so much going on in this culture and the young witch felt that she was missing out on a lot. It was the helmets the centurions wore that had her comparing them to Roman soldiers, with the crest running up the middle, they appeared identical to ones she had seen in museums.

That their tunics were an array of colours led Hermione to believe that this was based purely on the species of dragon they chose to make the tunic from. As Ragnok stepped onto the stage and sat in the centre seat, the other centurions filled the chairs either side of the director. It was then Hermione's breath caught in her throat, Harry had just walked forward and knelt in front of Ragnok.

His tunic was ivory in colour and his 'kilt' that had swayed as he walked was hardly longer than his exercise tunic. She had noticed that Harry, although a lot younger than the other centurions, appeared physically taller and broader at the shoulder than a good percentage of them. The director stood and began addressing the assembled crowd.

"My fellow goblins and invited guest, for millennia the position of Centurion has been coveted by each goblin warrior who has ever picked up a weapon. The young candidate that kneels before me now is no different in that respect. He may not have been born a goblin but has certainly been raised as one, embracing our beliefs and values to become a warrior of some renown. He attends Hogwarts but not as a wizard, Crow here is the first goblin warrior ever to attend that ancient seat of learning. There he still receives tutoring from some of our most illustrious masters, and extols the virtues of goblin learning to his classmates. Some of those classmates have actually joined Crow in these lessons - forsaking the offered wizard classes in the process."

Hermione was really glad of the translation charm now, otherwise she would have no idea what Ragnok was saying. She thought the

goblin leader was laying it on a bit thick, but wondered how much of that was influenced by today's issue of the Prophet? Ragnok was certainly giving Harry the big build up.

"Our young warrior had hardly set foot in the castle before accomplishing the first of his achievements, the lost goblin forged blade of Godric Gryffindor is back in our hands. It sits proudly on Crow's hip as the castle herself acknowledged a goblin warrior as her champion. This was no honouree position though, that sword he proudly wears has already tasted blood. The security of Hogwarts was breeched and a mountain troll was running rampage through the castle, it had three young witches and a female healer trapped in their infirmary."

Ragnok was an experienced orator and paused here to let the tension build, he also directed his gaze to Hermione. "The young witch who is our guest of honour here today is only able to attend because Crow saved all of their lives. He cut that troll down to size before jumping onto its back and administering the killing blow - almost decapitating the beast in the process."

This resulted in loud cheering, with all the warriors banging their weapons off their shields in appreciation of their brother warrior's victory. Hermione was blushing profusely at being singled out for attention, she couldn't imagine how Harry felt. He was still kneeling in front of Ragnok with his head bowed but Hermione didn't need to see his face to know it would be red from embarrassment. Harry was such a modest person that this must be torture for him. Unfortunately, the director wasn't quite finished heaping on the praise.

"If those achievements weren't enough to earn this young warrior the rank of centurion, his next deed certainly merited the award. Every warrior is taught that a sharp mind is their greatest weapon, and Crow's is every bit as sharp as that fabled blade he carries. With the help of his father, he engineered a coup that saw that disgusting ghostly spawn of Bloody Binns expelled from Hogwarts castle."

The cheering this time was tumultuous, and every single goblin was on their feet in celebration. Hermione hadn't understood the depth of feeling held against the ghostly professor, here was a very vocal and



visual representation of just how much Harry's victory meant to the goblin nation.

Hermione couldn't help but compare her meeting with the Minister of Magic to that of the goblin Director she was watching here. She equated the bumbling Fudge with his green bowler hat to Doctor Watson, while Ragnok was clearly the Sherlock Holmes of the two. Fudge couldn't impress a class of eleven and twelve year olds while Ragnok had over a thousand goblins hanging on his every word - and the Director still wasn't finished.

Ragnok waited until everyone had returned to their seats before continuing. "Now for everyone else, getting the butcher's last remaining kin thrown out of the castle would have been enough - not for Crow. He didn't want one goblin-hating professor simply replaced by another of the same ilk. A teacher not tainted by Binns was brought to Hogwarts from Europe to teach proper history, and not the bigoted filth that ghost pedalled. How did Crow get Hogwarts to accept this professor - he paid for it with his own gold!"

This seemed to impress the crowd nearly as much as the killing of the troll. Ragnok let this sink in before proceeding. "You have heard of this young goblin's deeds and achievements, it was I who, being so impressed with his actions, bestowed this honour upon him. As tradition demands, it is now time to ask if anyone here objects to this appointment. As I missed the fight where Crow drew first blood against Master Sharpshard, I'm rather hoping someone will come forward..."

There were sharp intakes of breath as that news permeated the hall, anyone thinking Harry unworthy of this honour were now going to keep those thoughts to themselves. There were a few members of Barchoke's family waiting on him passing away in the hope they would inherit, his adopted son becoming the youngest ever centurion killed that notion stone dead. A centurion as a son would satisfy goblin law, and that son would stand to inherit everything. These family members also reckoned their fate would be the same as their chances of inheriting if they stood and objected - dead as stone. Objections were settled by a duel, and anyone who could draw first blood against the greatest blade in the nation was not someone you wanted to challenge.

Ragnok had known about the hyenas circling around Barchoke's wealth, but, like the cowards they were, these hyenas would never attempt a frontal attack on a stronger opponent. Crow's award was unopposed.

"Arise warrior, do you accept this position our nation bestows upon you?"

Harry stood, performed the centurion salute before answering the question loud enough for everyone to hear. "Yes Director, I do."

Hermione had been warned about the blood involved in the next part of the ceremony, she rose with everyone else and tried to stand tall and proud. Watching as Harry held his hand out and that deadly battleaxe of the Director's sliced his hand open was very difficult. Harry didn't flinch as his palm was cut deeply, he clenched his hand into a fist as he made his way to his chosen tableaux.

The scene displayed Bloody Binns and his band of wizards being captured and held at swords' points by goblin warriors, but it was the murdered victims depicted there that Harry focused on. There was a dead goblin child carved out of the stone, the realistic wounds were coloured bloody and here was where Harry focused his attention. He rubbed his injured hand over the part that was depicted as bleeding, adding his blood to the tableaux. The rock actually began glowing, spreading to illuminate the entire scene as the stone accepted his blood sacrifice. This was also the signal for the loudest cheer of the day.

Harry marched back to the director who held out his hand, Harry placed his there and the cut was already healed. "The centurion has offered his blood to the nation, and the nation clearly accepted. Step forward those chosen."

Barchoke, Master Pitslay and Master Sharpshard stepped forward as three caskets were carried in and placed on the stage. Master Pitslay opened the first casket and removed the two gold armlets that it contained, he handed them both to Ragnok.

"The symbol of our wealth and status is contained in these bands of power, may they bring strength to your arms in times of strife." The director placed one on each of Harry's upper arms. Master

Sharpshard then stepped forward and passed the epaulettes the second casket had contained to the Director.

"The badge of office that signifies to the world you are a Centurion, wear them with pride."

These golden accoutrements were fastened onto each of Harry's shoulders. It was a proud father who opened the last casket and removed a beautifully crafted golden helmet, the plume running down the middle was the same ivory white as Harry's tunic.

Harry once more knelt before their leader as his father passed over the last piece to complete the ceremony. "A warrior's mind is their greatest weapon, may this protect you in your defence of our nation."

When the helmet was on, and the chin strap in place, Harry stood tall and performed the centurion salute three times. Once to the director, then his fellow centurions on his right before performing it lastly to those centurions on his left. Harry then turned to face the crowd, drew his famous sword and raised it high into the air.

"FOR GRINGOTTS AND THE NATION!"

The chant was returned by everyone present before the cheering once more broke out.

The first time Hermione laid eyes on Harry wearing his exercise tunic, she had mentally compared him to a young Ares. Harry standing there with his sword raised high increased the intensity of that comparison by a factor of at least ten. She didn't know if the colour of Harry's tunic and helmet plume was deliberate or not but Centurion Crow epitomised every historical image or representation of a warrior of the light Hermione had ever seen or even read about. The director's next statement heavily influenced her leaning toward the deliberate option.

Ragnok held his hands up for silence before making an announcement. "Some of you may have read the lies printed in today's wizarding press, we have sent our representatives to this newspaper to register our displeasure in the strongest terms possible."

This fixed everyone's attention. To a goblin, that statement was only one step away from blades being drawn.

"We announced to the press, the ministry, the WWN and posted notices in Diagon Alley that Centurion Crow would make a statement on the steps of Gringotts after this ceremony. This will mean a slight delay to the feast, but should be 'entertaining' for anyone who wishes to accompany us."

That was an invitation most of them would love to take up. That Gringotts steps wouldn't hold anywhere near a thousand goblins meant there would be a mad scramble for places after the Director's party left the hall.

Ragnok was in the lead, Harry - with Hermione once more on his arm - was right behind him. His father and their guests of honour followed on behind, flanked by the forty centurions and at least sixty warriors. The massed audience were behind the troops and all edging for a place where they could at least hear what would be getting said.

-oOoOo-

With the Wizing Wireless Network announcing they would be broadcasting a live statement from the boy-who-lived later today, anyone who couldn't make Diagon Alley had their ears glued to their sets.

In a castle in Scotland, an old wizard with a long white beard sucked on his lemon drop but found little solace from his favourite tart sweet. Harry's words broadcast live to the nation could do untold damage, and would be hard to refute. He had immediately contacted Cornelius to see if this could be stopped, even although he knew it was virtually impossible.

The minister had quickly pointed out what Albus already knew, Gringotts was sovereign soil to the goblins - ministerial interference could start a war. There was no point in banning the WWN from broadcasting since the entire thing would soon appear in print anyway. With hundreds - if not thousands - expected in the Alley, there was just no way to contain any damaging information the boy saw fit to disperse.

Albus thought it was a bad day when his only point of comfort was that the students would all be in class, he had no way of knowing that Professor Hobson would have a recording crystal containing the full incident for her classes by Monday morning. His new professor was a great believer in making history lessons relevant to what was happening today, and this could be history in the making.

In Devon, a young redhead sat beside the wireless with her mother. Ginny had gotten over the disappointment of not being able to go to the Alley today, once she had looked at the problem from a practical point of view. As small as she was, Ginny wouldn't see much in the crush that was sure to form. The fact that she was counting the days until she would be introduced to her hero helped quell that disappointment too. Hearing his voice would do - for now.

-oOoOo-

Amelia was in Dagon Alley with every auror she could throw a uniform on. Even with the cadets supplementing her force, she was still shorthanded for maintaining control over a crowd the size of this one. The crowd kept building as the wizards and witches of Britain turned out in their thousands for their first glimpse of the boy-who-lived. The aurors were stretched thin, not helped by those spectators arriving late and attempting to push their way to the front for a better look. This created surges within the crowd and Amelia thought it was only a matter of time before fights broke out.

That everything suddenly went quiet and the crowd actually took a step back surprised Amelia, that was until she turned around. Heavily armed goblin after heavily armed goblin just poured out the bank, their very numbers made the head of the DMLE's heart sink. Here was a force trained and ready for battle, that they outnumbered her aurors by at least two to one had Amelia worried. Like everyone else, she was expecting a verbal statement from Harry today, it would appear the goblins were making a bold visual statement too.

Then her eyes settled on the couple in the centre and she was left not knowing what to think. Mr Crow with Miss Granger on his arm appeared like a young prince and princess, standing there with their conquering army behind them. She could already see the press cameras snapping the pictures that would be front page tomorrow - and for most of next week too!

Ragnok's deep baritone voice rang out over the entire length of the Alley, his voice obviously charmed to carry so everyone could clearly hear his words. The WWN reporter had the microphone tight to his mouth as he described the scene for those who couldn't make it to Diagon Alley. When Ragnok began speaking, he had the good sense to shut up, hold out the microphone and let the radio listeners actually hear what was going on.

"Witches and wizards of Britain, you are being lied to. I know this for a fact but, relations between us being what they are, my words are easily dismissed. Instead, I'll hand you over to someone I trust you will believe."

Ragnok applied the same charm to Harry as his voice rang true around the Alley, and, thanks to the wireless, the entire country.

"I hope you will forgive me if I make a few mistakes here. This is my first ever attempt at public speaking, and we seem to have drawn quite the crowd." Some laughter rang out at that as the crowd settled to hear what the boy-who-lived had to say.

Harry had worked on this speech with his father so knew exactly what he wanted to achieve here. "Yesterday, my father took myself and my best friend Hermione to visit my parents grave. As you can hopefully understand, this was an intensely private occasion. Someone managed to sneak into the cemetery, eavesdrop on our private conversations and take that photograph without our knowledge or permission. To make matters worse, it all appears as an exclusive interview with me on the front page of today's Prophet. I have never given an interview and certainly never met this Daily Prophet reporter. For this Skeeter woman to claim I have makes one of us a liar. I'm standing right here and prepared to face her, publicly calling a goblin's honesty into question is a very serious issue."

In the silence that followed that remark, Amelia took it upon herself to officially ask a question. "Mr Crow, are you willing to make a complaint to the ministry?"

This was unexpected but again Harry let his training take over. "Well met Madam Bones, and it's Centurion Crow now. We've just come from the ceremony where this great honour was bestowed upon me. All goblin complaints to the ministry have to be routed through the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, I

am unaware if they have staffing issues but it's been years since we got a positive result from them. I would rather stand here as a goblin and call her a liar to her face, an action I am prepared to defend with my blade if necessary. My father had that area warded yet she still managed to sneak through and spy on us, I would have thought that would have been worrying to the ministry too - unless she is on the ministry payroll?"

Amelia attempted to quash that notion at once. "To my knowledge she is not, and it does concern me she was able to get so close to you. I also notice she is conspicuous by her absence today, Rita Skeeter is not one to miss such things."

"If she has the ability to spy on us in a graveyard, my guess is she would be here and using that same technique to remain hidden today. This time though all these good people have heard every word I've said, including that Skeeter is a liar. To me, that she does not stand and refute those claims confirms her guilt."

"Miss Granger, can you corroborate Centurion Crow's claims?"

She looked toward the director who cast the same spell on Hermione before she answered. "Yes Madam Bones. As you can tell from the picture printed today, I was at Harry's side the entire time. Neither of us spoke to anyone other than our parents. We are also concerned with who passed on the information that we would be at that cemetery yesterday, that information was known to very few. I can also confirm Harry is Centurion Crow..."

The charm Professor Flitwick cast now came into play as Hermione turned and bowed to Director Ragnok. When she spoke, it was in the director's own language. "I would sincerely like to thank Director Ragnok for inviting me here today. It was very moving to watch my best friend receive such a great honour, I felt honoured myself just by being there."

This had an effect on all present, not least the goblin leader. He had gambled somewhat in awarding Crow centurion status, and even more so by inviting his young friend to the ceremony. Ragnok thought that gamble had backfired after reading today's Prophet - a piece of astute manipulation by Dumbledore.

The only response the nation could give such an attack was to come out fighting, so that's why they were all standing here on the steps of Gringotts. He'd heard from Barchoke and their tutors that these two complimented each other, Ragnok had just witnessed this for himself. Crow stood there a proud Centurion for everyone to see, and the witch on his arm had just done more to instigate better relations between wizards and goblins than had been achieved in decades. Her display of respect and use of their language couldn't fail but have an effect on the hundreds of goblins currently watching and listening.

Ragnok paid her the deserved complement of returning her bow before addressing everyone once more - in English.

"For those of you who don't speak our language, Miss Granger was just thanking me for inviting her to the ceremony where her best friend became a centurion. I would like to say she bestowed our nation great honour in attending, and by her words here today. I would also like to say she will be an honoured friend of our nation anytime she chooses to visit Gringotts."

A quick glance at Harry was all that was needed to know this was something special, she bowed respectfully to the director once more, knowing it would be explained later.

The director returned his attention back to the gathered crowd of witches and wizards. "As you have now heard, the supposed exclusive interview in the Prophet is nothing but fabrication and lies. We have asked the newspaper to print a retraction, they naturally asked us for proof. This proof is now standing before you, though I fail to see Miss Skeeter in attendance. As well as a retraction, we demand to know how this was achieved. It's in everyone's interests that we discover if someone has stumbled upon a method of bypassing wards."

Amelia stepped forward and officially introduced herself to the goblin leader, before confirming her department would be investigating this phenomenon thoroughly. A warrant would be issued so Miss Skeeter could be brought in for questioning.

Ragnok thanked her before offering a closing comment. "We must now take your leave and return to the feast arranged to celebrate our newest centurion, I wish you all a good day."



The director had hardly finished speaking before his troops were shepherding the goblin spectators out of the way to clear a path back into the bank, Amelia couldn't fail to be impressed with their efficiency. The crowd had come to see and hear the boy-who-lived, they had gotten far more than they bargained for. The Prophet interview had portrayed Harry as a typical young wizard enjoying his first year at Hogwarts, today had told an entirely different story. Since they had stood and watched the entire episode unfold before their eyes, even the gullible witches and wizards of Britain could see the Prophet's version was a pack of lies.

-oOoOo-

As the commentator described the young couple following the goblin leader back into Gringotts, an old wizard in a Scottish castle knew his manipulation had spectacularly backfired.

"...I came here today like most of the crowd to get my first look at our saviour, the boy-who-lived. Instead of seeing Harry Potter, we were introduced to Centurion Crow. Here is a young man who has been raised by the goblins, and may I just say witches he's clearly thriving in that environment. The beautiful young witch on his arm compliments him perfectly, I suspect hearts will be breaking the length and breadth of the country when today's pictures are printed. That Centurion Crow bears no resemblance to the picture the Prophet painted of this young man leaves only one conclusion, we are being lied to..."

This was the point at which Albus turned the radio off. If the mindless cretin that WWN employed to ask inane and downright idiotic questions could figure that out for himself, the rest of the country would to. He expected a visit from William Weasley soon, that young wizard was far too smart not to figure out who had pointed the Prophet at the cemetery.

Albus would have to reel him in, that sounded so much better than blackmail. William would now have to play the game Albus' way, otherwise Gringotts would discover just who leaked that information. He didn't feel the least bit of sympathy for William, more than ever Albus now needed information. The worst that would happen to the eldest Weasley was that he ended up teaching defence at Hogwarts, that wasn't much of a sacrifice to make for the greater good.

He also expected to be hearing from Skeeter within the hour, Rita was about to discover Albus Dumbledore was a recognised expert at this game decades before she was born. When you played with the big boys, sometimes you got burned. Should Rita attempt to pass any of the blame onto Albus, the legs would soon be cut from under her. He mentally prepared his statement for the press / DMLE, just in case it became necessary to give one.

He had heard Harry would be visiting the Potter graves on Halloween, and passed that information on to Miss Skeeter. All he asked in return was that any article she wrote would show Hogwarts in a favourable light. He expected the reporter to ask Mr Crow a few questions before or after his visit, not spy on the entire thing and then report it as an interview.

He was certain Rita wouldn't disclose how she was able to spy on the boy, meaning Albus wouldn't need to mention that he knew Skeeter was an unregistered animagus.

-oOoOo-

The plan was always for Hermione to stay the night at Harry's but, with her new 'friend' status, a different world opened up for the young witch. She was in her training clothes and running beside Harry as he followed his usual underground route when at home. He was in his normal training gear with the sword strapped to his back. Hermione learned the gold armbands never came off, and the epaulettes were worn on everything except pyjamas. Thankfully the helmet was reserved for ceremonial duties, and wars.

As expected, they were drawing a fair bit of attention from everyone they saw or passed. Harry knew the next part of their routine would receive a lot more attention, and had planned accordingly. While Hermione was a quick learner with the wooden sword, she was nowhere near ready to practice those fledgling skills in front of an audience of goblins.

She was improving with her goblin shield though, and it was those skills they would practice this morning. Normally, this would be the only time Hermione removed her bracelet, but not today. The certainty that their practice was bound to draw an audience, and that audience would probably make Hermione nervous, Harry wanted to

have that extra security of knowing any curses getting past her guard would still be nullified.

Harry led them into a large cavern that was occupied by goblins practicing fighting, though there appeared to be just as many simply here to watch. In some strange way it reminded Hermione of a seedy boxing gym, and now it would take her hours to get the Rocky theme tune out her head. Harry had small portable ward stones that would stop any low level magic escaping, placing them on the ground to define a safe area. They started firing stinging hexes at each other and escalated from there, blocking with their physical shields when they couldn't dodge and erecting magical shields when they had to. They had escalated to stunners, and had worked quite a sweat up, when the cry of 'stop' issued.

Both stopped and turned to see who had issued such a command, they were faced by a wizened old goblin who was storming in their direction. Hermione was again in Rocky mode as here was 'Mickey' coming to chew them out, even his gruff voice was in character.

"Put those devil toys away at once, this is a place for real fighting."

Hermione was about to comply when Harry's voice stopped her. "Watch our backs." Those three words just dumped a shedload of adrenaline into the young witch's body as she took up position guarding Harry's back.

Harry almost casually reduced and clipped his shield onto his scabbard, their attracted audience could see he was deadly serious the instant he reached back for his sword. "Who are you to decide what real fighting is? Are you so old or just blind stupid that you can't see my rank? How dare you interrupt my training..."

"You snot-nosed whelp, get a bit of rank and forget who trained you..."

"You sir will address me properly, or there will be blood spilled here today."

The old goblin's face split into a grin that had many gaps before he gave the proper centurion salute. "Just remember Centurion Crow, never give the bastards an inch..."

"...or they'll walk all over you, I remember Whitefang, You've shouted that at me since I was five, how could I bloody forget. Are we done here, or are you planning another one of your surprises?"

Whitefang let out a rich laugh at that. "Well centurion, I can see that rank was earned. I had intended a couple of my boys would attack from behind but your little witch there seems ready for them."

Harry knew what Whitefang was trying to do, deliberately unsettle him while seeing just how far he could be pushed, but there was still more than a trace of anger in his reply. "That 'little witch' is Miss Hermione Granger, she is under my protection and named friend by the director himself. Insult her and I will introduce you to my blade."

The writing was on the wall - he'd pushed too far - and it was his understanding of such things that Whitefang eked his meagre living from, a bow and apology were quickly offered. "Sorry if I insulted you Miss Granger, that was not my intention."

Hermione returned the bow. "Apology accepted Master Whitefang ..."

This led to a loud burst of sarcastic laughter from Harry. "The only thing Whitefang is master of is the most disgusting mouth in the nation, and I don't mean dentally." None of the small crowd knew what Harry meant by his last remark but it made Hermione smile, and reduced her apprehension. If Harry was cracking jokes, the situation was well in hand.

"Since Whitefang has disrupted our exercise session, I suggest we head home for breakfast. My father has taken the morning off to spend some time with us before we visit your parents later." They picked up the ward stones and Harry had a few words with goblins he obviously knew, Hermione also noticed Whitefang watching everything closely.

As they left, Harry began supplying the answers he knew his best friend was dying to ask. "Whitefang is ... Whitefang. I know that doesn't help but I don't have any words you would understand to describe him."

"Harry, Rowena's charm is still working, just tell me in your own language." His answer had her blushing. "Ok, I get the picture, part

scoundrel, part loveable crook? How do you know him, and what does your father think of this?"

"When I was a good bit younger I used to get my arse kicked - a lot. Whitefang watched this happening one day - didn't stop it mind you - and had words with me afterwards. Said I had guts, but was stupid. You know me well enough now to guess how I would react to that."

Hermione actually smiled. "Not well I'll bet."

"Well Whitefang said I needed to learn to fight, not just stand up and get knocked back down again. He took me to the training place we were today, and gradually taught me every dirty way to fight there is."

This confused Hermione. "Then why were you so hostile to him if he helped you?"

"Oh he certainly helped me a great deal, but it's complicated. Had I shown him the respect I offer, say Master Sharpshard, Whitefang would have spat in my face and insisted I had insulted him. By treating him the way I did today, as a dangerous character I shouldn't be around, that to him is a form of respect he can accept. My father pays him for information occasionally, he's very good at blending into the background and missing nothing. Whitefang would accept gold for that, but never for helping me."

A sigh of exasperation came from his best friend. "Every time I think I'm beginning to understand goblins, something else comes along and changes it."

Harry just laughed. "We're a very simple race Hermione, let's run back and you can have some more of that ale you like so much. I must admit, I really miss it when we're at Hogwarts. Pumpkin juice is far too sweet for me, and the wizard's attempts to copy our ale - butter beer I think its called - is supposed to be disgusting."

"At the feast I noticed every one was drinking ale, that or wine."

"Hermione, we only have four drinks and one of them is water. Grog is never drank in public - it knocks you on your back after only a couple of tankards."

This was hard for Hermione to believe, her mother drank more types of coffee than that. This prompted another question. "Surely there must be more than four drinks, don't you have any hot beverages?"

"Sure we do! Hot water, hot ale and hot wine. Master Sharpshard is the only person I know who can drink hot grog - a good indication of how toxic that brew is when heated. I told you Hermione, simple."

Hermione was shaking her head, simple - right! This was going to take her years to figure out. That thought brought a smile to her face as she ran beside Harry, heading for his home.

-oOoOo-

Padma found her twin waiting on her as she left Ravenclaw tower, they hugged in greeting before Parvati told her why she was there. "I said to Neville I would walk you to breakfast this morning, we never get to spend as much time together as we used to. I don't think I like being in separate houses, and we won't even be together over the holidays."

Unlike her sister, Padma was enjoying being in a different house from Parvati. They really were two very different witches, with her more gregarious twin attracting all the attention while quiet little Padma faded into the background. Padma didn't resent her twin for this, you might as well blame the rain for being wet, it was just who Parvati was. It was only now though, being in a different house and having her own group of friends, that Padma felt she could let out the witch that - until recently - only she knew was in there.

"Pav, you seemed happy with Gryffindor, you and Lavender had a fight?"

"What, no! It's just that I thought it was going to be so different. I mean, look what we have to put up with - Ron Weasley - please! Seamus and Dean aren't much better, neither are the second years. One decent wizard and my twin sister has to snaffle him."

"Neville and I are good friends Pav, but I'm not expecting a marriage proposal soon. We hope to see him during the holidays but he won't be staying at Hermione's."

"No, you'll just have to make do spending the holiday with Harry. I still can't believe you marched down to the front of the great hall yesterday, that boy is a bad influence on you."

Padma had trouble believing it herself, but she thought Harry and Hermione were great influences on her. Without their friendship, she would never have had the confidence to stand up for them yesterday.

"Have breakfast with me this morning? I do miss spending time with you Pav, we can still be together more than we have been lately."

Parvati quickly agreed, before coming to the main reason for wanting to speak with her twin. "I heard Hermione mention shopping, presents and parties - can you swing an invite for me too?"

Padma was well aware Parvati would drive both her friends nuts with her constant chattering so tried to nip this idea in the bud. "Did you also hear her mention running every morning, lots of studying and living without magic for two weeks?"

"Running ...and no magic? How are you supposed to live without magic?"

"I have no idea Pav, but that's the whole point. I want to learn new things, and living with muggles for two weeks will certainly do that." Suddenly the idea wasn't so appealing to Parvati. When Padma said she would try and include her when they met up with Neville, she was delighted.

Both sisters entered the great hall and sat at the Ravenclaw table, being quickly joined by Neville. Padma was sitting between her sister and friend and thought the morning was just about perfect, until the Prophet was delivered and it got so much better.

A/N thanks for reading

## Chapter 17

The headline of Saturday's Daily Prophet screamed the newspaper's intent right from the front page, it was time to grovel! It also helped that they could blame everything on a convenient scapegoat.

### Penitent Prophet

as

### Centurion Crow Crowned

The imposing figure in our picture, wearing the golden helmet and carrying the sword of Godric Gryffindor, is Centurion Crow. That this is also the boy-who-lived immediately indicates there was an error made with the story concerning him previously printed in this newspaper. The beautiful young witch on his arm though, is once again Miss Hermione Granger. There all similarities with yesterday's issue of this newspaper end.

Both Centurion Crow and Miss Granger vehemently denied having met Miss Skeeter, far less participated in an exclusive interview before posing for a picture. It now appears as if Miss Skeeter has spied on the young couple as they visited the Potter graves on Halloween, the tenth anniversary of James and Lily Potter's murder. The Daily Prophet was in no way complicit with this reporter's actions and doesn't want to comment further at the moment, as Miss Skeeter is currently at the centre of an investigation initiated by the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. This newspaper will of course comply fully with that investigation.

Dan Granger let out a low whistle as he read over the front page article from the newspaper Barchoke had just handed him.

His wife was reading it over his shoulder and had her own comment to make. "Was that whistle in appreciation of the apology or the picture?"

Emma had to look at the picture twice to assure herself it actually was Hermione and Harry. Her daughter stood there looking every inch a princess, the jewellery she wore must be worth a king's ransom, while Harry appeared ready to do battle. Their poise and clothing reminded her of a famous historical couple, Mark Antony



and Cleopatra. Showing this picture to anyone who didn't know Hermione or Harry, you could never convince them these two were eleven and twelve.

The royal theme just wouldn't leave her alone as she looked at the wide shot the newspaper had also printed, Hermione and Harry were in the centre but surrounded by goblins dressed in their finest. The only thing Emma had to compare this with was a royal wedding photograph, the ones the press were so fond of printing as the Royal Family gathered on the balcony of Buckingham Palace. That there were thousands of people watching this picture being taken, and the newspaper dedicated a further nine pages to the event, reinforced the 'Royal Wedding' image in her mind. She just hoped her husband was following a different mental route.

Dan was indeed following a different mental route, this route was currently stuck on a giant roundabout that he couldn't find an exit from. The father was struggling to accept that this beautiful and confident young woman in the picture was actually his little girl. She was standing there facing thousands of strangers yet drawing the confidence to deal with it from the young man whose arm she was on. The newspaper went to great lengths to extol her beauty and poise, that she spoke gobbledygook and the goblin leader bestowed a great honour on her was certainly something he would need to ask Barchoke about when he got his mind back into gear.

"Well, there's one thing for certain Hermione, you absolutely destroyed any notion of you being a 'gormless village idiot'. Your father's opinion may be biased, but I think my daughter is truly beautiful. Then again, I've thought that since the day you were born."

His daughter's playful giggles at that was music to his ears. "Thanks dad, I almost wish I had been in Hogwarts this morning to see certain witches reactions when that was delivered. I'll need to ask Padma if Cho choked on her porridge or cried, I'm hoping for both."

"Hermione, isn't that rather unkind?"

"No Harry, it's not. I'm usually standing there on your arm while Cho tries to flirt with you. I know you do nothing to encourage her, and I can't really blame her either. How did the Prophet put it - 'dashing handsome young man, standing shoulder to shoulder with a nation's

leader as if he belonged there'. I understand why all the girls hit on you, it's the way they pretend I'm not standing there that annoys the hell out of me."

Harry decided to quote the Prophet straight back at her. "Well I don't know how they could possibly ignore 'the beautiful young witch who sparkles by my side' - and I don't think they were talking about that tiara you were wearing."

The three parents were laughing at the antics of their children. They may be front page news for the second day in succession but they seemed far more concerned with what they thought of each other than letting fame go to their heads.

"I'm just glad we managed to ward your house before this whole thing started, it also has an owl redirect which will allow Eargit and official Gringotts owls only. Anything else will end up at Gringotts where it can be examined before forwarding." This concerned the Grangers but they recognised that, even in their world, getting press coverage like this could attract its own special breed of weirdos and crazies. They were delighted any potential problems would be dealt with before they could get anywhere near Hermione.

Barchoke had even more good news for them though. "Hermione's status as a goblin friend allows you to do your banking through Gringotts, and get our best rates. This could save you thousands on your mortgage and business account. Get your figures and I would be more than happy to go over them with you - the savings will be substantial."

Dan thought he should be getting used to the shocks by now - your daughter is a witch and she needs to go away to Scotland for almost ten months of the year! "Well it looks as if our summer holiday next year could be a good one."

It was a nervous Harry who interrupted. "Em, excuse me sir. Since you were kind enough to invite me into your home over the Christmas holidays, I was hoping to return the favour at summer."

This piqued Emma's interest. "What did you have in mind Harry?"

"Well, because I had to remain hidden, I haven't really left Gringotts much. There are a lot of Potter properties dotted around the world

I've never seen, but that I now have access to. I was hoping you would be my guests as we explored some of them. They really do span the globe - from the South of France to the Seychelles and on to the South Pacific."

Dan was struggling to believe the wealth of this young lad, and yet how level-headed he appeared. "That sounds...unbelievable actually. Wouldn't we spend most of the holiday in airports though?"

This drew a puzzled look from Harry. "I don't think so Dan - since I don't know what an airport is." He looked to Hermione for help.

"Airports are where you go to board planes that fly you to your destination. Can I assume we would be travelling using portkeys?" A nod from her best friend saw Hermione offering an explanation to her parents, only for her mother to excitedly jump right in.

"Oh that young Weasley chap used one of them to take us to London in seconds, are you saying that these can be used to travel the world?"

Barchoke thought Emma's excitement at such a simple thing was a delight to watch. "A portkey will take you from one Potter property, directly to the next one."

Both Granger parents were overwhelmed at this.

"No waiting in airports for delayed flights..."

"No being bored out your head by sitting for hours on a plane..."

"No arriving to find your luggage is in Timbaktu..."

"No tedious transfers to and from the airports..."

"We're in!"

This was greeted by an eardrum bursting squeal of delight before Hermione actually jumped on Harry, wrapping her arms and legs around him and almost having both of them over. "I get to spend Christmas and summer with you! Oh Harry, that's wonderful."

Dan was watching his little girl wrap herself around a boy and his only reaction was to laugh, how could he possibly get upset when Hermione was so happy.

It was left to Barchoke to discuss practicalities. "I'll organise a folder of those properties that you can all look through when Harry stays here at the holidays. I plan on taking some time away myself over summer so we could either organise it to be together or split it and give these two a longer holiday."

This drew another squeal from Hermione as a delighted Harry twirled her around the room, all three parents were smiling at the antics of their two very happy children. It was also nice to see them acting their age for once, just a couple of kids very excited about spending their Christmas and summer holidays together.

"I think those two like the idea of a longer holiday but I also think we should build a bit of overlap in there too, where we can all be together."

Barchoke was quite overwhelmed at Emma's suggestion. That these people would actually arrange their schedule purely to spend time with a goblin wasn't just unbelievable, it was historically unprecedented. "I think I would like that very much. We may even have some company. If we can get Sirius Black out of Azkaban, I can't think of anyone who would be in more need of a holiday. It would also give Harry a chance to get to know his godfather."

This was something Dan was very interested in, the thought of an innocent man rotting in prison appalled him. "What do you think the chances are of getting him out?"

"To be honest, two very powerful men colluded to put Sirius in there. That these two are still as powerful is going to make this a very difficult task. At the moment, it's beyond us. That these two did this one unlawful deal would suggest there may be other skeletons in their cupboards. If we can discredit them, people would be more inclined to believe claims Sirius is in fact innocent."

This wasn't nearly quick enough for Emma. "Surely the mere fact the man never had a trial should see the entire case reopened?"

A goblin explaining to a pair of muggles how the magical world worked didn't even qualify for a raised eyebrow amongst this group now. "Azkaban is an exceedingly dangerous place, deaths amongst inmates is not uncommon. I fear that is the fate Sirius might face if we were to go public with this. Dumbledore may preach forgiveness - but only when it suits his aims. Barty Crouch is the ultimate hard liner. The man sentenced his only son to life in Azkaban, and his life is exactly what it cost the young wizard named after his father."

Dan looked over to the two children, still in each other's arms and chatting excitedly about their future plans. "We have to thank you for your honesty Barchoke, almost as much as the lengths you have undertaken to protect our daughter. The more I hear of this world, the more I worry about the decision we made to let Hermione join it. Then I look over there and see what I always wanted, my daughter happy."

"No thanks are needed Dan, I am also looking over there at my son being very happy. I will take every measure I can to ensure their safety. Gringotts now have an employee we can trust inside Hogwarts twenty four hours a day, seven days a week. Master Pitslay and Curse-breaker Weasley also make frequent visits to the castle. I'm sure we can trust their head of house and believe McGonagall is also on our side. Apart from getting Dumbledore thrown out on his ear, I don't think we can make that situation much safer."

Both Grangers were keen to know if that was a possibility, Barchoke did his best to explain the situation. "Dumbledore, for all his faults, is a very powerful and clever wizard. He's become so used to everyone around him doing exactly what he wants, we kind of caught him on the hop a bit. I'm willing to bet he instigated that entire incident with Skeeter, just as I'm willing to bet he'll have covered his tracks. Some of his earlier moves were stupid, born out of over confidence - he won't make the same mistake again."

"I just don't understand how one person could end up holding so much power?"

"I think it comes down to laziness again Emma. They've gotten so used to asking someone else what to do, we are reaching the stage where senior ministerial officials can barely think for themselves. Dumbledore has been repeatedly offered the job as Minister of

Magic but continually turns it down. The minister can be held accountable when things go wrong. Those manipulating the minister will escape any unpleasantness like that, and usually have a hand in choosing the sacked minister's replacement. There is no shortage of people every bit as stupid and just as easily manipulated as Fudge, all willing to do anything to take his place as Minister of Magic. It's a rotten and corrupt system, but those pulling the strings certainly don't want changes being made."

-oOoOo-

"I want some changes made - this makes us look like incompetent arseholes!"

Albus then enquired just what changes the minister wanted made?

"The lad kills a troll, saves three students and the Hogwarts healer, yet doesn't even earn a house point? The goblins give him a golden helmet for chasing a ghost out the bloody castle! The boy-who-lived, standing on the steps of Gringotts and talking about how honoured he is to receive an award from the goblins has seen the ministry inundated with owls. They all want to know why the person who rid us of Voldemort hasn't received as much as a ministerial thank-you. He's the Hogwarts Champion for Merlin's sake yet neither the school or ministry receive one positive mention in ten pages of the Prophet dedicated to the boy. This state of affairs can't be allowed to continue."

Albus had allowed Cornelius to get it all off his chest as the minister ranted and raved in the headmaster's office, he actually agreed with most of it. "I am at a loss to see how we can turn this around. If Hogwarts or the ministry start showering the boy with trinkets and awards, it's going to stand out for exactly what it is - us attempting to curry favour with Harry. He will see right through that and may even refuse to accept - imagine how embarrassing that would be? The goblins have won this battle hands down, I think we have to just acknowledge that and continue the fight from another angle."

"You really can't be serious - won't officially acknowledging this make the situation worse for us?"

"I think you have to add your congratulations to Centurion Crow. It might not be a bad idea to let slip the ministry were considering

something similar but don't want to be seen to be competing for the boy's affections so have put it off to a later date. I shall approach Minerva about the possibility of a special award to the school for his actions that day, presented at the leaving feast before Christmas. She has a better understanding of Crow and can determine whether the lad will accept before we let any announcement's slip to the press."

Cornelius was beginning to understand the angle this crafty old wizard was suggesting. "So we play it as if the ministry were in the process of recognising the boy-who-lived's achievements but the goblins stole a march on us. We congratulate the lad because the award is well deserved and will revisit our options to add our further congratulations in the future?"

"Exactly, sometimes the only option left is to doff your hat to an opponent in appreciation of the skill they displayed, also showing your determination to win the next encounter. I think this is one of those situations. As to how we win the next one, all I can say is I'm working on it."

Cornelius drew comfort from this, not knowing Dumbledore hadn't a clue what to do next. "Another coup like that for the goblins and I fear the battle could be lost, I've already had to publicly thank the goblins for doing such a good job in raising the lad. The boy-who-lived standing there dressed as a goblin, with a witch beside him dripping in priceless goblin jewellery, is a very powerful image. Especially since the goblin hierarchy were all lined up behind him, showing support for his award. It's going to appear to the magical population of Britain as if Harry Potter has deserted us - that is a state of affairs neither of us could politically survive. One more article like this and we might not have a hat to doff!"

Albus once again found himself agreeing with the minister. It shouldn't be too much of a surprise though, the one thing Fudge excelled at was judging public opinion - and shifting his own position to keep Cornelius Fudge on the right side of it.

-oOoOo-

Hogwarts was buzzing when Harry and Hermione returned, Padma immediately began teasing about having epaulettes on a Hogwarts robe. Hermione shot that down before it could go any further.

"Well I think they are handsome, and a lot more practical than some badge saying prefect or quidditch captain." Logic like that ended the teasing, though Padma just switched to what else they were up to in their time out of Hogwarts. It was almost a relief when they all needed to head to Herbology. By lunchtime, it was as if they had never been away.

-oOoOo-

Bill watched his students leave the classroom, and couldn't fail to notice Dumbledore waiting to enter. He had no intention of listening to the old wizard today, the supposed interview with Harry printed in the Prophet had sent chills up his spine. Had he not reported to Barchoke that Dumbledore managed to get that information out of him, Bill would currently be unemployed, homeless and a promising career destroyed. He wouldn't have to fake anger in this confrontation.

Albus entered and shut the door, only to be met with hostility.

"I'll save you the trouble of spouting whatever words you had prepared, I have nothing whatsoever to say to you and refuse to play these games anymore."

"Games - you think this is a game?"

Bill didn't back down an inch. "I know it's not a game - these are real people's lives that are being affected here. To you though, we're all just pieces in a game - a game where you have elected yourself the main player. All this greater good pish, and sacrifices have to be made shit. You can go and drown in your own stinking manipulations headmaster, I have no intention of making any sacrifices for the greater good of Albus bloody Dumbledore!"

Bill was pushing past the headmaster when Albus grabbed his arm. "This has nothing to do with what I want, I'm trying to save our world from changes that would destroy it..."

The curse-breaker jerked his arm out of the headmaster's grip. "Before I took this assignment, I spent my days working in tombs of people who couldn't adapt to change. They were the gods of their day, with the power of life and death over millions. Now all that is left



are some piles of stone - impressive piles of stone to be sure but their way of life is gone forever."

Dumbledore seized on this analogy. "If we allow things to continue, Hogwarts could be nothing more than rubble in a few generations. Our way of life is under attack from all sides, it's now more important than ever that we all stick together."

"My problem with that statement is we're all supposed to stick together, and do whatever Albus Dumbledore wants. What gives the headmaster of a school the right to determine the direction our way of life has to proceed? I have no intention of blindly following someone whose motives are at best questionable, and whose actions are borderline criminal."

This was not going the way Albus had planned. If he thought about it, very little had gone to plan recently. "So you would rather align yourself with the goblins than your fellow wizards?"

"I'm aligning myself with Harry, that just happens to be the side the goblin nation are supporting too. I would rather put my trust in that young man than be a mindless follower of the self-proclaimed leader of the light." Bill had his hand on the door before Albus dropped any and all pretence.

"You claim to support Harry, yet were involved in a major breach of security against the lad's safety. I wonder what your goblin masters would make of that information, should it find its way to them?"

"It was you who passed the information onto Skeeter?"

Dumbledore thought he had his man now. "Ah, but I wouldn't have been able to, if you hadn't told me about the proposed visit beforehand. I truly am sorry to do this William but you leave me no choice. I desperately need information, if you won't cooperate then perhaps your replacement will be a bit more accommodating."

Bill's eyes were boring into the old wizard. It was a confident Dumbledore who was standing in front of him. The curse-breaker could see that Albus thought he was in a win-win position - time to end his delusions. It was also time to admit to himself he was shite at this spy crap - there was just too much of the Weasley temper in him to be able to play nice with people like Dumbledore.

"You're a learned wizard headmaster so I will leave you with a simple puzzle. Rearrange these words into a well-known phrase - OFF, FUCK!"

With that Bill left the classroom, slamming the door behind him. Leaving behind a surprised and confused Dumbledore.

-oOoOo-

Harry was sitting at dinner talking with his friends, attempting to explain some of the muggle things he'd seen at the Grangers to Padma and Neville while Hermione smilingly looked on. It was such a pleasant scene, Bill was loath to interrupt. A few whispers in Harry's ear drew a nod of understanding and his friends could see playful Harry slip away, being replaced by the persona that was Centurion Crow.

Bill patted Harry on the back before taking his leave, no one in the hall thought anything of him approaching and talking with his students.

It was naturally Hermione who asked Harry what was going on. "Oh, just as we suspected, Dumbledore has been playing games again. I'm just trying to figure out the best way to use this."

The headmaster entering the hall from a side door and taking his place at the staff table appeared to make Harry's mind up. Before he could rise though, Hermione's hand clamped on his leg.

"Are you sure about this Harry?"

He smiled at her. "No, but I shouldn't be in any danger. I'm far better confronting him in the hall, with McGonagall and Master Flitwick here."

"Couldn't we send for Master Sharpshard too?"

He lifted her hand off his leg and kissed her knuckles. "Hermione Granger, you're actually developing a goblin sense of humour."

Harry stood and strode to the front of the hall. He attracted attention most of his time in Hogwarts but almost every pair of eyes must have been watching him by the time he reached the staff table.

Harry didn't bother with any preliminaries. "Dumbledore, you told that Skeeter reporter I would visit my parents' graves on Halloween."

The silence that followed those words drew out until Snape actually broke it. "Mr Crow, that is a pretty serious allegation to make. Do you have any proof?"

"It's Centurion Crow sir, and yes I do. Curse-breaker Weasley let slip to the headmaster where I would be going, and then this despicable old bastard just tried to blackmail my tutor into passing over more information. He admitted telling Skeeter where I would be, before threatened to report how he learned the information to my father - if Curse-breaker Weasley didn't do what Dumbledore told him to."

Minerva practically had steam coming out her ears at that revelation. "Do you know what Mr Weasley's answer was?"

"Yes professor, I believe he told the headmaster to fuck off!"

This drew some laughter, and had a pair of redheaded twins up on the Gryffindor table doing a jig of delight.

Harry wasn't finished yet though. "For ten years I was safe within Gringotts walls, I haven't been here ten weeks yet but it has been one attack after another. First evening, you attempted to have me renounce my goblin upbringing, while at the same time having Voldemort sitting at the staff table. Add in trolls, bullies and death eaters - getting the picture headmaster? Then when I step outside Hogwarts, you tell someone exactly where we'll be. You endangered not only me, but Miss Granger too."

Dumbledore finally spoke. "Am I to take it that Mr Weasley's attempts to save his job by slandering me are being believed?"

"Curse-breaker Weasley is a wizard with honour and integrity, two qualities you are sadly lacking in. He also reported the incident to my father on the day it happened, we just didn't think you would stoop so low. We already knew you were behind the supposed interview, attempting blackmail just confirmed it. I am very happy

with the defence tutor my father found me, Curse-breaker Weasley will not be going anywhere."

Minerva felt she had to intervene before this escalated any further. "Centurion Crow, I'm sorry but calling the headmaster a 'despicable old bastard' is against school rules, and will earn you another detention with me. Rest assured though, I agree with your assessment - that whoever released this information endangered two Hogwarts students. I shall be reporting the matter to the DMLE and the Hogwarts board of governors."

Harry nodded respectfully to McGonagall, fully aware that the detention would be nothing more than another tutoring session. "I understand Professor, and like any other student will obey Hogwarts rules. Please inform both of those bodies I would be quite happy to speak with them on this matter. May I ask that you make this sooner rather than later? My father's patience with Albus Dumbledore is pretty much exhausted, and both Hermione and I understand French well enough that attending Beauxbatons would not be a problem."

As Harry was heading back to his seat, McGonagall called out to him. "Centurion Crow, nice to have you back. It would be a sad day for Hogwarts if you and Miss Granger left."

A slight nod of his head was all the indication he gave that he had heard, though the students he passed to reach his seat could all see he was smiling. Both Harry and his father knew it was more likely to be a series of body blows that would lead to Dumbledore's eventual downfall, rather than one knockout punch. The headmaster was sitting at the table reeling as another scheme had not only failed, but spectacularly blown-up in his face. Dropping in the line about Beauxbatons would hopefully muzzle him for a while, and give the goblin plans time to bear some fruit.

Hermione was just glad to see Harry make it back to her without any weapons being drawn, though Percy had to restrain his twin brothers when Dumbledore attempted to push the blame onto their eldest sibling. The name Dumbledore had taking a bashing amongst the Weasleys, and one glance around the hall was enough to see it was Harry's version of events that was being believed.

Severus certainly believed Albus would attempt to blackmail Bill Weasley to basically become his spy, the potions master only

wished that he had been in a strong enough position to deliver the same answer to Dumbledore all those years ago. He had studied the 'Centurion Crow' edition of the Prophet from cover to cover, all he could think of though was that Lily would be so proud of her son.

Looking at that 'army' behind him kindled hope in Severus that this boy might actually be capable of finishing the dark lord. It was now clear to anyone paying attention that Dumbledore was also firmly in Crow's sights, and set to fall if the potions master was any judge. Being the Slytherin that he was, he needed to do something so that Severus Snape wasn't dragged down with either of the two wizards who had dictated his life since he was a teenager.

The more he thought of Harry as Lily's boy, the more Severus found himself appreciating just what this boy could do. He had no idea Harry was about to make his life even better.

-oOoOo-

They had hardly left the great hall when the Weasley twins approached the group of friends. "Harry, we would like to thank you for defending our brother in there..."

Harry held up his hands to stop them saying any more. "Guys, not only do we all like your brother, he's a brilliant teacher. Working for Gringotts comes with some pretty tight restrictions, but we also look after and reward our employees. Now I have a question to ask you - can you two be serious?"

"Of course we can..."

"What do you think we are..."

"A couple of jokers?"

"Something tells me I could regret this but what class do you two have on a Friday morning?"

"Divination, why?"

It suddenly hit George and he was down on his knees pleading, his twin only seconds behind.

Hermione had also sussed just what was going on, and questioned Harry's choice. "Are you sure about this Harry?"

"Of course I'm not, but I think I should give them a chance. Master Pitslay offered another couple of places, who else could I chose? I couldn't pick a pair of Hufflepuffs or Slytherins without upsetting the rest. Same with Gryffindor, though I honestly don't think any of their first years are up to all the work involved - sorry Padma."

"No problem Harry, Parvati would be the first to admit she doesn't enjoy studying."

Harry once more turned his attention to the twins. "Ok guys, but you need to get McGonagall to agree to this - and Snape!"

Harry was suddenly up in the air and being twirled around as both twins had him in a hug Hermione would have been proud of. The whoops of joy soon drew an audience, and a fair bit of laughter. Both twins gently lowered Harry back to his feet before shaking his hand.

"We won't let you down Harry."

"Most of our pranks are potions based - we understand this is a life-changing opportunity for us."

"Reserve an extra two places at your study table Neville - we're off to see McGonagall!"

As they skipped along the corridor, it was a worried Hermione who expressed a thought most of them shared. "Oh dear, I wonder if Master Pitslay will know what hit him?"

"Hermione, where do you think I learned to brew the potion I used on Snape? Master Pitslay knows more prank potions than anyone else in the country - they are just more subtle than donkey ears and the like that the twins seem so fond of. With goblin humour, sitting at a formal dinner and having your victim loudly letting one rip is considered the height of hilarity."

"Ok, I need to write home and make sure we have a good selection of comedy tapes for Christmas. You need to learn a different definition of funny."

Harry's eyes almost glowed at this. "You mean there are more video tapes than the ones you already have?"

"Thousands Harry, with new ones released almost weekly."

This had a wide smile on Harry's face, and caused laughter amongst the friends.

-oOoOo-

Bill didn't find any laughter when he entered his sister's room. Instead he found a young girl staring into a mirror with eyes red and swollen from crying.

"Mum said you've been upset Ginny, do you want to talk about it?"

As her brother's arm went around her, Ginny leaned in to him as the tears once more began falling. "You tried to warn me, didn't you?"

Ginny indicated the Prophet pictures lying scattered on her bed. "How can I compete with that - how can any girl compete? She's like a princess on his arm, and he's already madly in love with her."

Bill hated to see his sister like this but thought Ginny might finally be coming to her senses. He wanted to discover how she arrived at this conclusion though. She reached over for a picture that was showing definite signs of wear, Ginny had obviously studied it quite a bit.

"Just watch and you'll see him glance at her, making sure she's okay. Her smile back practically has his eyes sparkling. You told me they were close friends but you don't look at a friend like that. She's beautiful, so smart and already speaks gobbledygook - little Ginny Weasley never stood a chance." She cried some more before asking Bill a question. "You didn't go to Hogwarts this weekend, wasn't Harry there?"

"They stayed with Hermione's parents a few nights but both stayed at Harry's too."

"She stayed at Gringotts - is that even possible?"

"Hermione is a friend to the goblin nation, that gives her all different kinds of privileges."

Bill could feel Ginny's tears soaking into his shirt as his sister clung to him, realising that her dreams would never be more than that. He held her close and let Ginny cry it out.

It was a while before she actually spoke. "Will you still introduce me to him?"

"Are you sure that's something you want to do?"

He could feel Ginny nodding her head as it was still buried in his chest. "I think I need to see it for myself. At least now I know what to expect. I'm going to be at Hogwarts with him for six years, perhaps we could be friends?"

Bill agreed to that, delighted that his favourite sister appeared to be coming to her senses. "Just remember what I said, no boyfriends until you're at least twenty six." He'd hoped for a smile but had to settle for her holding him tighter, it was her first steps on the right road.

-oOoOo-

Padma had gone to bed, leaving Harry and Hermione sitting together on a sofa in their study area.

"So, are you glad to be back? It was quite the few days."

"Now, that's an understatement Harry. I loved my time at Gringotts with you but getting to spend some time with my mum and dad was just wonderful. Knowing we'll all be together at Christmas has already got me so excited, and I told you my parents would love my best friend."

"Your parents were great - sorry for spring that summer thing on you. It was something I had been thinking about and had barely gotten a chance to talk it over with my father. When your dad mentioned it, I didn't want him making arrangements before we meet again at Christmas..."



He found himself enveloped in a hug. "Only you Harry could apologise for arranging someone's summer holidays. I didn't think my mum could get any more excited at Christmas but this year looks like topping all the others. I'm now gonna have two friends staying, and planning our summer holiday too." Hermione kissed him on the cheek. "Thanks Harry - for everything. I'll see you in the morning for our run."

Hermione headed up to her room, leaving a grinning Harry behind.

A/N thanks for reading.

## Chapter 18

It was a red-faced Harry and Hermione who were sitting in their history class. Professor Hobson had a goblin memory displayer, and a crystal that contained the memory of Centurion Crow speaking from the steps of Gringotts. The player was a black pyramid shaped object that the crystal slotted into the apex of, projecting the scene in about one eighth scale - with sound.

The scene ended as Ragnok headed back into the bank, all eyes were once more focused on a stoic Harry. That attention was never going to last though, not with the beautiful Professor Hobson in the class.

"The reason I have been showing this scene to all my classes is not to embarrass a certain pair of Ravenclaws - rather to show history in the making. Now I want to hear your answers to what you thought was historic about this event. As our acknowledged experts, Centurion Crow and Miss Granger will be asked to cover any points we may miss."

Morag's hand was first to shoot up, quite an achievement considering all the boys were desperate to please their favourite professor. "Hermione was the first non-goblin ever to witness a centurion ceremony. Do you have a memory crystal with that on it professor?"

"Correct Miss McDougal, and sorry but no. Those ceremonies are wrapped in mystery and secrecy, perhaps Mr Crow could tell us something about it after we finish this. Anyone else?"

Some other suggestions were offered - including Lavender's 'most expensive collection of jewellery ever worn at the one time by a witch' - before Neville had his hand up.

"I've met Harry's father, Barchoke, and I am tutored in potions by Master Pitslay. We all remember Master Sharpshard's visit to Hogwarts but I don't think I've even seen a picture of the goblin director before?"

This earned Neville a big smile and a 'well done' from Professor Hobson, making him blush. "The fact that Mr Longbottom recognises so many goblins is practically historic in itself, the point he made

though is correct. Until he appeared that day, no one outside Gringotts knew what he looked like. This is Director Ragnok's first ever public appearance outside Gringotts, and the first time the director has had his photograph taken by a wizard. What have we missed Miss Granger?"

Hermione's mind was still stuck on learning that all the classes were seeing the projection as part of their history course. No wonder Cho was drawing her daggers when Harry wasn't looking, this was far more graphic than any photograph. She would need to ask Harry about these projection pyramids, her mum and dad would be blown away watching this.

She snapped back to reality and had an answer all ready. "Well, apart from being the youngest warrior ever to be granted centurion status, Harry is also the first warrior not goblin born to achieve this great honour."

"Once more correct but not not exactly what I was looking for. Okay Mr Crow, it's left to you to tell us why this was really an historic occasion. An historic occasion that could one day affect us all."

He didn't disappoint. "Madam Bones talking with Director Ragnok is the first official contact between the ministry and the head of the goblin nation in over three hundred and fifty years."

This drew a loud reaction from Amelia's niece. "What! How is that possible?"

"It's actually quite simple Susan. The ministry decrees we must contact them through the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. For Gringotts leaders to officially contact this department would mean we accepted them classifying goblins as mere magical creatures - something I can guarantee you will never happen."

Susan Bones at least had an inkling of how the ministry worked, and wondered how the goblins had gotten around this problem. She asked and Harry once more supplied the answer.

"Oh, every month the bank clerk with the lowest Gringotts approval rating gets to take a folder full of documents to the ministry. Since nothing has been done about the past points raised, or complaints

made, we are not even sure if anyone actually reads them. Every month now, at least one of those documents will be bogus. A recipe for dragon stew, the best technique for cutting toenails - complete with clippings as proof, that kind of thing. There was even a competition at school once to see who could come up with the best idea, the winner was chosen to be that month's bogus entry. The ministry think they're fooling us while we're quietly having a chuckle. Goblin sense of humour - which is almost impossible for any non-goblins to see the funny side of." Harry looked in the direction of his friends. "Believe me, I have tried."

"I think modesty is also preventing Centurion Crow from elaborating on a point we touched on. The entire goblin leadership was standing publicly and squarely behind his appointment to this post. The message this very public display sends out is that the goblins support a child born to a witch and wizard being appointed to one of the highest posts in their nation. That boys and girls is history right there. In a very public way, the goblins are showing that they see no difference between us. It is only our attitudes that define differences."

Draco was desperate for this professor to notice him so just had to state what he thought was obvious. "Professor Hobson, Centurion Crow IS different. He is clearly not a goblin."

"Ok Mr Malfoy, let me ask you this - I'll even open the question up to the entire class. Do you think the goblin nation would award a dementor centurion status? What about a dragon? Griffon? Acromantula?"

"What's an Acromantula professor?"

"Imagine a tarantula the size of Hagrid and you won't be far away from describing an Acromantula..."

She was interrupted by Ron Weasley falling off his chair, giving Draco a chance to once more compete for her attention. "The answer to all of those would have to be no, it still doesn't tell us why Centurion Crow is different."

"All those things I mentioned come under the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures portfolio - as do the goblins." She loved teaching for this moment, when you could see

young minds begin to make connections for themselves. "Now if we can see what's wrong with that, why can't the ministry? The answer is simple - they don't want to. The British Ministry of Magic is one of the few magical governments in the world where sentient magical beings are still treated like mere beasts."

She let this sink into the young minds before continuing. "My job here is not to cram a bunch of names and dates into your heads, more to get you realising that history is all around us every day. A very wise muggle actually produced a quote that has kind of become my mantra, 'Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it'. We are still going to focus on specific historical events, but dig deeper into each in an attempt to discover what was really going on. Only when you understand that, can you hope to avoid making the same mistakes."

The young Swedish professor could see that made sense to her students, she hoped the next bit did too. "I think one of the main reasons the history syllabus at Hogwarts was allowed to deteriorate to the sorry state it was in is that the ruling governments of the day didn't want their actions studied too closely. Every history course I've ever seen includes some relatively modern events in it."

The professor paused, wondering just how far she could take this with first years. She decided this was something they really needed to know. "Over a decade ago, magical Britain reached a condition that was a mere step away from civil war. The general belief is that this was fought by purebloods wishing to take what they considered their rightful places and rule the country - utter rubbish! The death eaters were a bunch of terrorists attempting to overthrow a country's legal government, with the rest of the magical world monitoring the situation closely in case they had to intervene. Don't get me wrong, the other governments weren't about to rush to Britain's aid - rather end the problem here before it could spread to their countries."

The young professor was used to her classes hanging on her every word, she wondered though who would ask the first question about the next revelation. "Propaganda played a large part in the dark lord's strategy, personally I think he copied a lot of the German ideas from the second world war. Replace aryan with the word pureblood and most of the ideas are the same."

Hermione's hand was up in a flash, getting a grin from her teacher.

"Professor, my friends are purebloods - and a goblin. The point is, none of them know anything about Hitler or his plans for a master race. How could this dark lord know about it?"

"Ten points to Ravenclaw for getting right to the heart of the matter Miss Granger. The answer though is surprisingly simple, the dark lord is not a pureblood..."

This caused uproar in the class until the professor held her hand up for silence. "When I tell you something, I don't want you to instantly believe me. I want you to do research and actually try to prove me wrong. What you need for that though are facts - not hearsay."

She pointed her wand at the board and the name Tom Marvolo Riddle wrote itself, the letters then shuffled to reveal 'I am Lord Voldemort'. "The dark lord was nothing of the sort, being clever with anagrams does not bestow a lordship on you. His mother was an unmarried, impoverished pureblood who died giving birth to her son, but his father was a muggle. Young Tom spent his pre-Hogwarts years in a muggle orphanage - records of his muggle school attendance and even some report cards still exist. You can check the Hogwarts roll and see he was a Slytherin - head boy too."

Neville's jaw matched those of the majority of his classmates, in that it was practically hitting the floor. That was before he turned and spotted Harry sitting there unconcerned. "You knew?"

"It's vital that you know your enemy Neville."

Professor Hobson had a lot more revelations for this class. "Now, having established his true identity, it's important to discover the real aims Tom had. Quite simply, this self-styled lord wanted to rule the world - and would go to any lengths to realise his ambition. Seeing where all the wealth and political power was held, he aligned himself with the purebloods. Not all bought into his claims though, but Tom had an answer for that too. He coined the term blood-traitor, classing any pureblood who opposed him as such."

Again this drew gasps from her students, things like this just weren't talked about in 'mixed' company. "Traitor is a very emotive word. Even in muggle Britain, the act of treason could still see you hanged. The treason act hasn't been used for over fifty years but it's still part

of their laws. Some of the most eminent magical members of this country were labeled blood traitors, simply because they opposed this maniac. This gave families they had been close to for generations the perfect excuse to stand back and do nothing, while their fellow purebloods were almost wiped out. Families like Bones, Longbottom, Potter, Abbot, and many more - all lost people to this maniac and his followers."

There were some moist eyes now as this was history that struck close to home, but Professor Hobson wasn't finished yet. "Miss Granger, sorry to keep picking on you but I need someone with a pre-Hogwarts muggle education like Tom's to answer this. Can you think of any muggles who would dress in costumes with masks to victimise a specific group of people?"

The image popped into Hermione's head instantly. "The Ku Klux Klan, they promoted white supremacy."

A flick of the professor's wand and a Klan figure was drawn on the board, alongside a death eater. "Aryan supremacy, white supremacy, pureblood supremacy, are we seeing a pattern here? Tom Riddle is an immensely powerful wizard, and also a very clever one. Taking what he had learned from both sides of the magical divide, he fabricated an entire persona. Here was a wizard who had nothing but almost ended up ruling Britain. No wealth - take someone else's, no old family name - make one up, no blood status - who's to know! He set wizard upon wizard for his own gains and almost wiped out a way of life."

Pansy nervously raised her hand and spoke when asked to. "Professor, aren't you afraid what could happen to you for saying this?"

"Miss Parkinson, when you're afraid of the truth then you're living a lie. These facts are taught in most of Europe's magical schools. Should Tom or his followers attempt to return, I for one will be standing against them. I will do so of my own free will, though it doesn't help that your ministry would have me reporting to the same department as Centurion Crow here. Now for homework..." She stopped because a hand had shot into the air. "Yes Miss Brown?"

"Professor, you said when we were finished, we could ask Harry about the centurion ceremony. Are we finished?"

Henrika Hobson had thought the material she was covering today might have been a bit advanced for these students. She was very pleased to see she had reached most of them - though Miss Brown's attention was clearly focused elsewhere. The young professor glanced toward Harry. "Centurion, I am not asking you to reveal any secrets but could you tell us anything - even about the position of centurion? This is merely a request, please don't feel you have to."

"Professor, I would hate to trivialise one of the most important history lessons we've ever had..."

"It's quite alright centurion, I think the class would appreciate ending the lesson with some lighter material."

Harry glanced around the classroom, seeing some tearful and frightened faces. The professor invited him to the front of the class and he went.

"The position of centurion is an ancient one, they existed long before the Roman armies used the term for a squad commander. It's not really a fair comparison since I don't have a squad of warriors. Professor Flitwick mentioned Order of Merlin and muggle knighthoods, neither of which is really close. The medieval knights of old are probably the nearest things I can think of to compare a centurion with. We live our lives by a strict code of honour and our blades are always ready to defend the nation."

Tracy wanted to confirm what she was hearing. "Are we talking about Knights of the Round Table here Harry, King Arthur - that kind of knight?"

"Well, Merlin was a friend of the goblin nation - as is Hermione - so I don't think that should be too surprising."

This had his best friend blushing as all eyes were now on her. In magical Britain, any comparison to Merlin was a great honour. Lavender though had another question. "Do you wear a suit of armour too?"

"I carry my armour with me at all times, goblin armour is different from the suits you'll see dotted around the castle..." Harry suddenly



realised everyone would now want to see it. He shook his head before making his way back to his desk and kicking off his shoes. When the robe came off and landed on the desk, Professor Hobson interrupted.

"Centurion, just what are you doing?"

"I assumed the class would want to see my armour. I like these shoes and this shirt, I destroyed a few before getting the hang of this. My practice tunic is dragon hide and can cope with the transfiguration."

As he unbuttoned his shirt, the witches were now ogling Harry's exposed torso - but not for long. His armbands suddenly started to expand, a metallic lattice began to spread over Harry's body like a second skin. In a matter of seconds, golden chainmail armour covered every square inch of his body - with only his face still exposed.

"A Hogwarts uniform wasn't designed to let armour grow under it. Shirts tend to rip unless loosened, and shoes burst at the seams."

Terry was looking at Harry in awe. "Can you still fight in that? It looks dead heavy and cumbersome."

He glanced toward Hermione. "Should we give them a demonstration?"

"I've never fought in a skirt before..."

"You might have to one day, an enemy won't allow you time to change clothes."

Henrika established control of the situation immediately, wanting to know exactly what was being proposed before it went any further. "Just what are you suggesting centurion?"

"Sorry professor, I should have asked your permission first. I'm teaching Hermione how to use a sword, I was suggesting a quick practice to show how my armour performs as I fight - with wooden practice swords of course."

Hermione took her goblin shield out her pocket, expanded and slipped it onto her arm - just as the bell rang for the end of class.

This drew groans of disappointment from the class, though Harry did supply an answer to Terry's question. "The armour isn't really heavy though it is taking a bit of getting used to, it feels a bit like moving in water at the moment. I use it in our sword practice and am building up to wearing it while running. I hope to have it mastered by the Christmas holidays."

"Speaking of holidays centurion, I'm hearing you might have just changed my summer plans?"

"Sorry professor, that was not my intention. I know you'll be busy at the start but you would be more than welcome to join us near the end of it."

"Why thank you centurion, that is a very generous offer I might just take you up on. I can just as easily write lying on a beach as stuck in an underground room."

As Harry was putting on his robe, he once more received jealous stares - but this time from the boys. He could feel Hermione bristling with indignation on his arm as they left the class, though had no idea what he'd done to deserve it. Neville gave him his first clue.

"Are you really going to spend part of the summer holidays with Professor Hobson - on a beach?"

Harry decided to go with his usual approach - the truth. "As you've just seen, Professor Hobson is a brilliant teacher. To lure her to Hogwarts, my father had to offer something she couldn't get elsewhere. The professor will be spending her holidays with us in Gringotts..."

Hermione stopped walking at this, causing Harry to enquire what was wrong. Her reply of 'nothing' clearly wasn't right. "I thought you'd be pleased, this is what you wanted?"

"Harry, if this is more goblin humour, I'm not seeing the funny side here."

"I thought we agreed it had to be an outsider, someone who could highlight the differences. I also thought she did a brilliant job of that just now."

"Harry, you're not making any sense..."

"My father got permission from the director to allow Professor Hobson to stay with us - while she studies our culture before writing a book on goblins. It was only this unique opportunity that convinced her to leave her last school and come to Hogwarts. She will spend the next few summers at Gringotts."

It was like watching a light switch on for Hermione as she realised just what was happening, a broad smile spread across her face as she once more started walking with Harry.

"Are we ok?"

"Of course we are Harry, I'm really sorry about that. I was just being silly, but we talked the problem out and got it sorted. I think it was watching the rest of the boys practically fall over themselves to please Professor Hobson, and then imagining her coming on holiday with us - I said I was being silly didn't I?"

Here was the information Harry was missing, and he was soon smiling himself. "Hermione Granger being silly, I don't believe it. It's Professor Hobson's Veela heritage that has all the boys tipping over themselves - it doesn't affect goblins."

This raised a number of questions for Hermione but she chose to leave them for later, the young witch felt she'd made enough of a fool of herself already today. The jealousy had engulfed her without warning or any real cause, on either Harry or the professor's part. She was getting used to other students hitting on Harry but Hermione thought it may have been triggered by the fact she could never hope to compare with the stunningly beautiful professor. The very idea of being on a beach with the blonde witch sent shivers of dread through her young body. A smiling Harry on her arm was quickly banishing those thoughts away, and showing them for what they were - pure silliness.

They reached the great hall and had hardly sat down when they discovered just how quick the Hogwarts rumour mill actually

operated. Roger appeared to have been delegated to ask the question that every male Ravenclaw suddenly wanted to know the answer to.

"Harry, did you really invite Professor Hobson on holiday with you?"

Again Harry went with the truth. "She's working on a project for my father over the holidays. Since we'll be on a beach, I didn't see anything wrong with inviting her along too."

One of the sixth year boys shouted down the table to Harry. "Is your father looking for anyone else to help with the project? I'll work for free?"

This generated some laughter though Roger summed it up perfectly. "Merlin Harry, if you thought you were popular before, this is going to eclipse everything. What's getting out of Snape's potions class compared to time on a beach with Hottie Hobson!"

There was no laughter this time, just a lot of wizards letting their imaginations run away with them - and a lot of witches scowling at them for doing so.

That Harry sat unconcerned chatting with Hermione and Padma over lunch settled the last of his best friend's nerves, and left Hermione wanting to hug the life out of him.

-oOoOo-

There were no smiles in the private conversation Harry had later that night. Getting goblin suspicions confirmed by Hogwarts meant that there was now a fair bit of planning to be done.

-oOoOo-

The twins were rather upset when they discovered their eldest brother was in the castle but would miss their game against Slytherin. "Sorry guys but I am working. If the game's still going when our lesson finishes, I'll certainly be there to cheer Gryffindor on."

They both looked to Harry for help, only to be disappointed. "Sorry too guys, training comes first. Your brother is a brilliant teacher and we need all the defence training we can get."

Bill led the four friends out the hall just as the quidditch captains were calling on their teams to make their way down to the pitch.

The door of the classroom had hardly closed when Harry turned to his three friends. "I'm sorry for deceiving you like this but there is no lesson today. There's a mission I must carry out inside Hogwarts and, with the entire school out at the quidditch pitch, this is the perfect time."

Hermione was on him in a flash. "This obviously has to be secret but please tell me it's not dangerous?"

"Curse-breaker Weasley and I are going to look for something. The only danger we can see is the possibility there may be some magical traps around the object, something that he deals with on a daily basis."

"Oh good, that means we can come and help?"

Bill started laughing. "...and that is why I don't gamble with goblins. Harry here wanted to bet me that would be your response but I wasn't buying into that."

While this was greeted with a smile from Hermione, Padma wanted to know exactly what they were signing up for - and just what they were looking for.

"The item is the diadem of Rowena Ravenclaw."

This drew gasps from the two female claws, Padma found her voice first. "I'll say this for you Harry, you don't do things by half." Spotting Neville's confused appearance, Padma helped their Gryffindor friend out. "It's a tiara Neville, something like the one Hermione wore to the centurion ceremony. Our Harry here is conveniently ignoring the fact that it's been lost for centuries - and believe me people have been looking for it. The centurion here expects to get his hands on it while a school quidditch match is taking place - rather ambitious don't you think?"

This drew a smile from Harry. "Not if you know what room it's in. Apparently though the room is vast - and full of junk. We can split into two teams of three but only Curse-breaker Weasley is to go anywhere near the item."

This again drew Hermione's attention. "Why, is it dangerous?"

"It could be, the last person to handle it was Tom Marvolo Riddle. We're taking no chances and it will be sent straight to Gringotts to ensure it's safe."

Neville had a couple of questions of his own. "Is the castle okay with you removing it - and how do you make two teams of three when there's only five of us?"

"Hogwarts told me where it was Neville..." Harry didn't need to answer the next part as Professor Hobson entered.

-oOoOo-

Hermione couldn't stop running her free hand up and down her new robe. Harry had been so sure they would want to accompany him that, not only did he invite Professor Hobson along, he had protective duelling robes made for the three of them. Like Harry's tunic, they were all made from dragon skin. Her other hand was of course on Harry's arm, that they had stopped and Harry was currently talking to a stone wall had Hermione slightly worried. She should have known better.

"Hogwarts, your champion needs access to the room of hidden things."

A large oak door appeared to melt out the stonework and they entered a cavern full of - everything!

This was where Bill took charge. "Padma, Neville, you're both with me. Everyone get your dragon skin gloves on - and be very careful. If you see a tiara, do not approach and under no condition is anyone to touch it. Henrika, send up red sparks if any of your team spot it and we'll come running. Let's do this search in an orderly fashion so that, should we run out of time today, the search can continue when the next quidditch match is scheduled."

Hermione's eyes were scanning the vast cavern, and not just for a tiara. "There is hundreds of years worth of stuff in here, some of this could be valuable."

Harry noticed her eyes were fixed on an old bookcase as she said this. "Yes, and some of it could be dangerous. This is a mission Hermione, you need to focus."

She nodded in understanding as they began to search the part of the room assigned to their team. Professor Hobson playfully nudged her before asking in a conspiratorial whisper, "Is he always this intense?"

"Oh no professor, this isn't Harry being intense. Wait until we meet a troll, then you'll see intense."

Henrika was laughing at the young witch's comment, that was until she discovered Hermione wasn't joking. Perhaps she should have studied her job description more closely before accepting this post.

Bill was beginning to think they would have to wait until the Ravenclaw / Hufflepuff match at the end of the month before resuming their search when a spray of red sparks lit the roof of the chamber. The trio quickly headed in the direction the spell had been cast from.

The other team were standing well back, heeding Bill's warning but Padma headed straight for it. Harry and Hermione were physically holding her back while Bill scanned the area.

"It's emitting a powerful compulsion charm, I want everyone further back."

The three friends and Professor Hobson soon had Padma out of range, earning an embarrassed apology. "I'm sorry, I just don't know what came over me. How come I was the only one affected?"

Harry answered while watching the curse-breaker work. "Hermione's bracelet would protect her, as would my armour. Neville's got his mind on other things..."

Neville was standing beside Professor Hobson with a goofy grin on his face, enticing giggles from both girls. Those stopped as Curse-

breaker Weasley appeared to have disarmed any traps, he reached out and grasped the legendary item. As he put it into the container he'd brought with him specifically for this purpose, it was then slipped into his bag.

As they were leaving the room, they found the Grey Lady and the Bloody Baron waiting on them. Harry immediately bowed to both. "My Lady, your mother's diadem has been found. It will be taken to Gringotts where the disgusting taint will be removed from it. Once restored to its former glory, it can make a triumphant return home."

The ghost smiled for the first time in living memory. "Hogwarts is very pleased with the actions and deeds of her champion. A burden I have carried for centuries will soon be lifted, the house of Ravenclaw is in your debt."

"There can never be a debt between us my Lady, that I am considered worthy for the house your mother founded is all the payment I will ever need."

Bill was glancing around anxiously. "Harry, I think I should get this out the castle at once, before a meddling old headmaster pokes his crooked nose in."

Henrika agreed. "Go Bill, I will escort them back to the great hall, and cover should anyone enquire why we're up on the seventh floor."

Bill left but Helena had one more surprise for them. "Young champion, the room you have just left has the ability to become whatever you request. It's getting rather cold and dark to be running outside at the hour you both do, the room can provide you with somewhere light, dry and sheltered to run."

"You mean the room can change to whatever I want?"

"It's the room of requirements, so called because it can change to meet the user's requirements. You just need to tell the room what those requirements are."

Harry bowed deeply once more. "That truly is a gift beyond measure, I offer you my thanks Lady Helena."



The quidditch match was over and the great hall was full by the time they made it down. From the celebrations coming from the Gryffindor table, it was easy to see how the result of the game had gone. Neville was in no danger of being teased about missing the match, walking into the hall in his new duelling robes was not the reason though. It was the blonde professor at his side that halted any inclination to tease, even the quidditch obsessed Oliver Wood would admit spending the morning with Professor Hobson was preferable to watching a mere school game.

-oOoOo-

Minerva was sitting in her school apartment, drinking a cup of tea while reflecting on the busiest and most revolutionary term she could remember at Hogwarts. That this revolution could be laid at the feet of a green-eyed Ravenclaw was beyond doubt. Revolutionary was really the only word to describe the effect he'd had on transfiguration. It was still a week to the Christmas holidays yet her first years were already well into second year transfiguration tasks. That they didn't use any of the prescribed spells, or the specified wand movements left her unsure of what the future held.

Here was a class who would ace the practical tests but all fail the written papers, simply because they didn't use any of the prescribed course work. They spent their time studying and practicing the actual magic involved, rather than writing essays on procedures they didn't use. Since even the slowest in the class were now well ahead of where they would normally be on her usual teaching schedule, what possible grounds did she have for objecting? - Not that Minerva had any intention of doing so.

The new history course was also having a big impact on the school, as was the professor teaching it. Henrika had earned Minerva's respect by standing toe-to-toe with Dumbledore and not backing down an inch. He'd quickly demanded she stop teaching the students about Voldemort, only to be refused in no uncertain terms.

"I'm here to teach a curriculum pre-approved by my employer before I started, I will not have my students failing exams because the headmaster decides I should not pass on the relevant information to them. I would also like to point out that neither you nor Hogwarts are my employer, I work for the Lily Potter Foundation. Should you wish to change anything, you would need to contact them. I believe the

foundation is currently administered by Gringotts Senior Accounts Manager, Barchoke."

Minerva couldn't help but smile at that memory, or the effect that name had on the old wizard. Albus had stormed away after that, 'thwarted again' was the phrase that came to Minerva's mind. She had also noticed the young witch keeping the company of William Weasley when he was in the castle, much to the chagrin of the students.

Filius was also walking just that little bit taller with the prominence his house was currently enjoying. The head of Ravenclaw was also crossing swords with the young centurion in an effort to teach him how to fight with blade and magic at the same time. He proclaimed Harry's control of both was growing at an exceptional rate.

Even Severus was less dour than usual. With Severus, that was probably as good as it was going to get. His acceptance of Harry as Lily's son seemed to have done wonders to his demeanour, the Weasley twins leaving his potions class would also go down as a red letter day for the head of Slytherin.

Even Albus appeared to have temporarily curbed his attempts to manipulate the lad, perhaps his continual rebuffs were finally beginning to take their toll? Minerva doubted it though, and thought next week's presentation to Centurion Crow at the leaving feast would at least be entertaining. That white owl of Harry's was always delivering mail so his father would be well aware of what was happening, the Gringotts presence now in Hogwarts was also considerable. Albus appeared to think he was dealing with a young boy who could be easily swayed, he didn't seem to take into account the support team Harry had around him. Minerva would also consider that support team now contained three Hogwarts heads of houses, a knock at her door was just about to prove her wrong.

She found a rather nervous Severus standing there. "Can I come in a moment Minerva? I have a rather delicate matter I would like to discuss with you."

Minerva invited him in. Rather than try and guess, she waited on Severus bringing the matter up. Just as well, they would have been Dumbledore's age and she still wouldn't have guessed correctly.

"I have something I would like you to pass on to Centurion Crow from me. Seeing that picture of him taking those flowers to his mother's grave, and then setting up a foundation in her name, set me thinking. As you know, Lily and I were as close as he and Miss Granger - before I ruined it. What I do have are years of memories that I feel her son should have. I arranged a lot of photographs I had of Lily into a small album, I would really appreciate it if you could pass them on to her only child."

Minerva had to sit down at that revelation. "Of course I will Severus, that is very thoughtful of you. I perfectly understand why you wouldn't have any pictures of Harry's father, would you mind terribly if I added some to your gift?"

Severus took a moment to think about Minerva's offer before nodding. As long as he didn't have to see them, that was something he could live with. He handed over the leather bound album that had an embossed lily on the front before bidding Minerva a good evening.

-oOoOo-

Rita Skeeter wasn't having a good evening, she wasn't having a good anything anymore. She had stood firm at her questioning by the DMLE, claiming a journalist had to protect their sources and methods. Her lawyer had charged a fortune to point out that Rita hadn't broken any laws - or at least they couldn't prove that she had. Those bastards at the Prophet had dropped her quicker than the presses could print extra copies announcing that very fact to the world. With no one else now willing to employ her, Rita was sitting in the corner of the Leaky Cauldron. All alone, and nursing a drink at her own pity party.

Her party was gate crashed by a wizened old goblin with an exceedingly gruff voice. "You can sit there for the rest of your life feeling sorry for yourself, or you can pick your skinny arse up and get back at the bastards who did this to you."

Rita sharply snapped back at the old goblin. "I don't recall asking for your opinion?"

A smile with many missing teeth now greeted Rita. "I wasn't offering my opinion, I was offering you a job." This instantly focused her

attention, as did the small sack of money Whitefang dropped onto the table.

"You posses an ability to obtain information no one else can get, the person I'm working for would like to see you use that ability on certain targets. He even has a project that involves writing - you interested?"

The money rapidly disappeared into Rita's robes and she was soon following Whitefang out of the pub.

A/N Thanks for reading

## Chapter 19

Harry entered the great hall for the leaving feast, and walked right into a storm of protest. The reason for this storm wasn't hard to ascertain, Harry was in his dress tunic and carried his helmet under his arm. A blue cloak/cape, trimmed in bronze, completed his ensemble. Hermione was of course on his free arm. The source of this tropical depression of protest wasn't too difficult to spot either, the robes the headmaster was wearing would probably be deemed as too outlandish by Elton John.

"Mr Crow, that is not proper Hogwarts uniform."

"It's Centurion Crow, and this is proper attire for someone of my station to receive an award. To dress otherwise would be to demean both the award and the occasion."

Dumbledore wasn't so easily swayed, he tried a different tactic. "This award is being presented to you as a Hogwarts student, surely school uniform would be more appropriate for this occasion?"

"When I was offered this award, it was presented to me as being a school occasion. On arrival though, I can't help but notice the Minister of Magic is here - along with the press. Your inclusion of these outsiders alters this event to a formal occasion, which requires formal dress. Your alternative is to ask the outsiders to leave and then I would gladly change, you can't have it both ways headmaster." Harry gave a rather wry smile at the dilemma he'd just dropped on Dumbledore. "In anticipation of you changing the conditions of the award presentation, I dressed appropriately."

Albus decided to put his foot down, after all - this boy was a mere student and he was the headmaster. "I'm sorry, but I must insist you go and change. We will hold the beginning of the feast until you return." From previous experience, he should have realised how well this tactic worked on Harry. Albus discovered his mistake pretty quickly.

"I am also sorry because, if my dress uniform is unacceptable, I will of course leave - though I won't be returning tonight. For a centurion to receive an award in the presence of a national leader, and not be in the proper uniform could be construed as an insult. Therefore, it is with regret I must decline your award."

The first flash of the photographer's camera captured forever Dumbledore's expression as he was once more publicly told 'no' in his own school. He also had no idea things were about to become much worse as his planned positive publicity perished right in front of his twinkling eyes.

Harry had plans for a ceremony of his own design. "Hogwarts, your champion begs an audience."

The four house ghosts made their way to the front of the hall as Harry donned his helmet, he then reached into his bag that Hermione was carrying. "Master Flitwick, could I have a moment of your time please?"

The diadem of Rowena Ravenclaw was sitting on a blue and bronze velvet cushion that Harry held in his outstretched arms. The tiara captured light from the hall and reflected it back in a kaleidoscope of colours as Rowena's fabled diadem majestically sparkled on its journey to the front of the now hushed hall. He knelt before the ghosts and offered the diadem up like a royal crown. "What was lost has been found, what was tainted has been cleansed. Your champion returns this precious artefact to its rightful home."

The great bell of Hogwarts rang out once more. This though was no dong of doom, here was the sweet chimes of celebration that spread throughout the entire castle.

The Grey Lady made no attempt to hide her delight. "Hogwarts is jubilant at your achievements young champion, as am I. Professor Flitwick, can I ask you to accept my mother's diadem on behalf of her house? We will make arrangements for it to be publicly displayed so everyone can have a chance to see it, before it returns to its rightful place in Ravenclaw Tower."

Albus stood there, still as any statue, as the press practically fell over themselves in their desire to ensure they missed no detail of this unbelievably historic event. That this story was not the one they originally thought they would be covering mattered not a jot to them. It was glaringly obvious though that this wasn't a view shared by the minister. Cornelius' complexion almost matched his famous bowler hat as he sat there experiencing the worst thing in the world for a politician - being totally overlooked and ignored.

What was really concerning Albus was the bold and reckless move of broadcasting this event to the country, he knew exactly what Harry meant by 'tainted'. Here was the horcrux that must have been hidden inside the castle, hidden right under his nose for all those years. He considered this a reckless move, very publicly providing the dark lord with proof at least one of his horcruxes had been discovered and destroyed. That this had all happened in his school, again without his knowledge, worried Albus a lot more than the bad press they would get for Harry refusing his Hogwarts award. Dumbledore was actually hoping that, in the furore over the diadem's return, this little fact may be overlooked.

Albus almost overlooked Harry's next move. Even as he watched it though, the headmaster wasn't sure if he actually believed what he was seeing.

Harry approached the staff table and bowed deeply. "Potion Master Snape, it is our custom that a precious gift should be reciprocated in kind. I could never dream of matching the gift you gave me and can only hope you'll consider this worthy."

A slim but obviously ancient book passed between the two. The normally sneering persona of Severus Snape vanished like a wisp of smoke, this version wore a look of wondrous astonishment - currently matching the one displayed by Harry's still speechless head of house. Severus was also struggling for words. "Where...how...this was thought lost forever. How in Merlin's name did you find a copy of this?"

A smiling Harry was reminding himself to thank Master Pitslay the next time they met. "Like the diadem sir, it's all a matter of knowing where to look."

This had given Severus the time needed to regain his composure, he respectfully stood and performed the centurion salute before replying. "Centurion, to the both of us, the subject in question is precious and irreplaceable - but this is still a priceless gift! I thank you and think she would be very proud of the young man her son is becoming."

Harry took no insult at being described as a young man, instead accepting the compliment in the spirit it was offered. He sincerely

returned the salute. "That is more than enough for me sir, I wish you a Merry Christmas."

He strode past Dumbledore once more, not even acknowledging the headmaster before offering his arm to Hermione and leaving the feast supposedly being held in his honour. Padma and Neville were hot on their heels, with the vast majority of their classmates deciding to show their support and follow on behind.

Harry was heading for the room they now used when training in the morning. Harry asking a corridor wall for a room in which to hold their Christmas Feast saw some funny looks heading in his direction, these were followed by gasps of astonishment as a door simply appeared. This was nothing though to their reaction upon entering the room. It sparkled and shone like some fairy tale ice palace - thankfully without the expected severe drop in temperature. The massive table constructed of this 'warm' ice was rapidly filling with food from the Hogwarts kitchens, the barrel of ale immediately caught Hermione's attention. "Is that what I think it is?"

"My father sent it with Curse-breaker Weasley, he figured that since you loved it so much, our friends probably would too. Its been hidden in the kitchens since last weekend."

"You knew what the headmaster was going to attempt today." Hermione offered this more as a statement than a question.

"I have my sources Hermione, and those sources warned me what he was up to." He didn't want it known that the sorting hat was passing what went on in Dumbledore's office to Lady Helena, keeping Harry one step ahead of the headmaster's plans.

Padma was standing there with her mouth open. "This looks nothing like the room we were in the last time."

"You should see it for our training in the morning - its brilliant!"

"Hermione, I don't care if the room was dripping with diamonds and gold - nothing will get me up at that time to do exercises."

Harry was busy inviting everyone else into the room. "Grab a seat and help yourself to some food. Neville, Terry, Michael and Anthony



- can you guys give me a hand dishing out some goblin ale for everyone."

Terry just about summed the rest of the first years' thoughts up. "Merlin Harry, you certainly know how to throw a party. I was sure you would have something up your sleeve but all this and ale too? Really impressed mate."

Hermione didn't want Harry getting a bad reputation, she decided to set everyone straight before rumours started to spread. "Goblin ale is non-alcoholic, it's also the best thing I've ever tasted."

Soon everyone was sitting and the goblin ale was passed around, they were all waiting to start and looking at Harry for permission. "Hey, I'm not Dumbledore. No speeches here - just tuck-in."

So they did.

-oOoOo-

McGonagall couldn't find the rest of the first years anywhere, all the ghosts would say was that they were still inside Hogwarts, perfectly safe and eating dinner. She walked with her Gryffindors from the great hall back to their tower, curfew was approaching and she wanted to see her missing first years in their dorm before retiring for the night. She heard her five lost cubs long before laying eyes on them, they were laughing, joking and apparently saying goodnight to some people.

They entered through the portrait hole and weren't perturbed in the slightest by her presence, in fact the two girls couldn't wait to tell her what they'd been up to.

"Oh professor, you should have seen it. Harry spoke to a wall and then this wonderful room just appeared - it was gorgeous."

"We had a fantastic party, Harry even brought goblin ale into the castle. It's a bit like butterbeer - only much better."

Neville was quick to defend his friend. "There's also no alcohol in it professor, did you have a good evening?"

Only years of practice stopped Minerva from smiling, she did have a stern reputation to maintain after all. "Apparently, not as good as yours. Now I want to see all of you heading for bed, the express leaves directly after breakfast."

With a chorus of 'yes professor', a group of happy children headed up the stairs. Minerva was sure Albus would see this as evidence that Harry was gathering followers around him, just like a certain Tom Riddle had done all those years ago. Everyone else could see the situation for what it really was, an enigmatic young man making friends with his peers, but the headmaster could not accept the obvious explanation. Albus was worse than any pit bull sinking its teeth into something, when he got an idea in his head - there was just no letting go.

The only first years not at the alternative feast were Malfoy and his diminishing band of cronies, and of course Ronald Weasley. This meant there was a mixture of all houses at the 'party', and every blood persuasion she could think of. Minerva couldn't get over that every single one of them had all voluntarily walked out of the great hall, trusting that Harry would have made alternative arrangements. Add to that the lad was spending Christmas in his best-friend's muggle home and Harry seemed to be going for inclusion - rather than exclusivity based on any form of blood status.

-oOoOo-

They were all heading for their respective dorms when Harry leant into Hermione and spoke softly enough so that only she could hear. "I need to speak to Susan Bones, and pass on a gift from my father. Can you stick close and not ask any questions?"

Hermione agreed at once but had a suggestion. "Would you prefer me to ask her for a quick word?" Harry's smile was all the answer she needed.

Susan wasn't sure how she ended up staring into those intense green eyes from close range but Harry mentioning her Aunt Amelia soon had her focusing on the matter at hand.

"Could you pass a message on to your aunt? This is very important and can't go anywhere near official channels, my father would like to speak with her at her earliest convenience." Harry handed over a

small inlaid lacquered box. "If your aunt enters Gringotts wearing this brooch, she will immediately be taken to see my father. This will save her having to draw attention to herself by asking for him by name. Please accept this brooch as a gift to the House of Bones, without obligation and irrespective of whatever your aunt decides to do."

Susan recognised the language being spoken here, and also replied formally. "On behalf of the House of Bones, I'm honoured to accept this gift in the spirit it was offered." It was only then Susan's control slipped. "Can I open it and take a look Harry?"

"Of course you can."

Hermione thought that's how she must have appeared when she first opened the box containing her bracelet. Susan's eyes nearly popped out her head before she quickly shut the box again. "Oh Harry, it's simply beautiful. I'll speak with Aunt Amelia the instant I get her alone. I assume this is something to do with her being head of the aurors?"

"I'm pretty sure that's the case, all I know is my father wants to urgently speak with her. When he uses words like 'urgent', it must be important. We better get a move on too, otherwise we'll be out after curfew. Thanks again Susan."

They were walking quickly to Ravenclaw tower. Hermione thought it would be alright to ask a question now, since it was just the two of them. "Do you really not know what's going on?"

"No, which has me slightly worried. You must have noticed, letters from my father are not written in English. Even with that security though, he wouldn't take the chance of writing it down. That brooch will tell Madam Bones this is serious, a gift like that to House Bones is not to be sniffed at. Her wearing it into Gringotts will alert every goblin Madam Bones is under our family's protection, and see her service improve a hundred percent. My father will probably fill us both in later."

-oOoOo-

The journey home on the express couldn't have been more different from the one that delivered them to Hogwarts. Gone were the two

lonely children reaching out to one another. In there place sat a young witch and goblin who were sharing the compartment with their friends. This time, there was no searching up and down the train looking for the boy-who-lived. Everyone on the train knew who Harry Crow was, and Hermione Granger too. Now, when someone popped their head into the compartment, it was to wish them a good holiday and Merry Christmas.

When it was once more just the four of them, Harry broached a subject he'd been struggling with. "Padma, I know that, like me, you don't celebrate Christmas. I wanted to experience the full thing though, so asked Curse-breaker Weasley to explain it to me. I loved the idea of getting small gifts for your friends..."

This met a wave of protests that Harry only stopped by holding his hands up for silence. "Hey, this matched the only written reference we could find to these customs. We could understand the gold bit, it was the frankincense and myrrh that had us really confused..."

Harry was once more interrupted, but this time by Hermione almost choking with laughter. Every time she looked at Harry it would start again, only him offering his handkerchief allowed the witch to get control. Thinking she must look a sight was enough to do it.

"Anyway, before being so rudely interrupted..." Hermione showed her maturity by sticking her tongue out at him, "I was about to ask for your help with a problem. It wasn't the gifts as such that caused the problem, rather who to get them for. You three were of course top of my list - then I hit problems. I got our Ravenclaw year-mates sweets but it was Parvati that gave me the biggest headache."

He now had two young witches staring intently at him, which left Harry wondering if he'd gotten it wrong again. "She's not just Padma's sister but her twin. I feel quite bad that we seem to have monopolised all Padma's time, and now she's spending the holiday with us too. I've gotten Parvati a gift yet I'm trying to avoid there being any misunderstandings why I did it. I'm still not a hundred percent sure what I got wrong that morning after the troll but Parvati's tears were real enough. I need help in avoiding a problem like that again."

Padma glanced toward Hermione and her smile gave the unnecessary permission. She leaned over, hugging and then kissing

Harry on the cheek. "Harry, that is so thoughtful, thank you. If you want, I could give it to her and avoid any problems?"

It was a relieved Harry who reached into his bag and handed a wrapped present to Padma, she left to find her twin sister. Harry pulled another package out his bag and handed it to Neville. "We won't see you until after Christmas so I think it's best to give you this now."

Neville opened the package to find a small goblin-made sheath knife. It had an ivory handle and a three-inch razor sharp blade, all enclosed in a reddish dragon hide sheath. "It can be used to take plant cuttings or preparing potions ingredients."

"It's brilliant Harry, thanks a lot."

Hermione was smiling and shaking her head at the same time. "Harry, you continually surprise me."

He smiled back at her. "That's a good thing - right?"

-oOoOo-

Ginny was waiting with Bill on the platform, her new dress not quite long enough to hide the fact her knees were shaking with nerves. As the bright red engine pulled the carriages into the station, it took almost the same amount of herculean effort for Ginny to remain standing by her brother's side. The desire to hide behind Bill was practically overwhelming the young witch. The students soon began pouring out from the carriages as hundreds of witches and wizards in high spirits erupted onto the platform, Ginny was focusing all her attention on spotting one particular student.

Being the youngest of seven children meant Ginny already had a well-honed ability for watching everything that was going on around her. Being the smallest, and female, saw her continually ignored and overlooked, thus providing even more opportunities for her to develop this skill. Living in the same house as Fred and George, this could also be considered a necessary survival technique.

She soon spotted the smartly dressed boy with long black hair, the witch on his arm helping Ginny confirm his identity. She also noticed the Indian witch and another wizard who were remaining close. A

stunningly beautiful Chinese witch practically ambushed the group as she attempted to claim Harry's attention. Even from this distance, Ginny could see her ploy was doomed to failure. Harry's body language had instantly shifted from relaxed to stiff formality, and both witches in his company clearly resented this intrusion.

The little scene was soon shattered by the speedy arrival of another witch, this one had an entirely different interpretation of how an ambush should be carried out. She raced up to a clearly unsuspecting Harry and threw her arms around his neck, a quick greeting was followed by a kiss on the cheek. She rapidly disentangled herself before cheerfully greeting the rest of his friends and then dragging the Indian girl - who could only be her twin sister - away.

Whatever the Chinese girl had planned, this clearly unscheduled intrusion destroyed her play as effectively as a brace of well-hit bludgers. She quickly mumbled something before departing, a distinctly unhappy witch. Saying a much more heartfelt goodbye to their other friend saw the pair start to make their way toward them.

Even now though, the number of people who warmly greeted the pair as they passed was impressive. A redhead witch, who was clearly more 'developed' than little Ginny Weasley, waving and smiling as they passed each other also had the effect of allowing Ginny to finally say goodbye to her fantasy. Ginny wasn't sure if she even have the right to claim it as 'her' fantasy anymore, it was painfully obvious most of the witches who got off the train harboured strikingly similar fantasies of their own toward Harry. She wondered how the girl on his arm coped with all the clearly unwanted attention, Ginny knew her Weasley temper would see her wanting to curse anyone who so blatantly flirted with someone she considered as hers.

It was too late to hide now, they were here. A greeting to her brother was followed by the most gorgeous pair of eyes focusing on her, and Ginny finally understood Harry's popularity. When this boy focused his attention on her like that, Ginny's insides totally melted. She forgot all about the fame, wealth and deeds, here was someone you just had to get to know.

"Hello Curse-breaker Weasley, this must be the sister you were telling me about?"

"Hi Harry, Hermione, yes this is Ginny, and she'll be going to Hogwarts in September."

Ginny was suddenly faced with a hand held out in front of her, not necessary the one she wanted though. Ginny was learning first hand - no pun intended - how Hermione coped with all the witches chasing Harry, and also that here was a witch who she didn't want to cross.

"Hi Ginny, I'm Hermione. Bet you're desperate to get to Hogwarts? We'll look forward to seeing you there. Don't worry too much if your not in Ravenclaw, we have friends in all four houses."

Even in the short time she'd been watching them, Ginny had already noticed that the only way to get near the 'real' Harry was through this witch. Even with the Indian twins, you could easily see which one Hermione approved of. She quickly held her hand out and shook Hermione's. "I would like that - a lot. My brothers tend to forget I'm there sometimes."

Her hand was soon in Harry's and Ginny's battle now was not to hyperventilate. "Well your welcome to join us anytime, we've always room for more friends."

Ginny's blush might have been bright enough to stop every train in Kings Cross but her wide smile warmed Bill's heart. He'd known all along this was a gamble but this time he was betting on a goblin, Harry had said exactly the right thing. Ron's arrival threatened to ruin the moment but Bill managed to convey with a glare just how much trouble Ronnie would be in if he opened his big mouth - and the moment passed.

Padma's arrival saw her introduced to Ginny too, before she apologised to her friends. "Sorry Harry, I thought I had it covered. Parvati must have opened her present the moment I left and decided she really had to thank you personally. It is a beautiful scarf and she'll probably never take it off, she does understand why you gave her it though. My parents were pleased too, and rather keen to meet you. Could we arrange that for sometime later?"

"No problem Padma, I'm glad she liked my gift."

Bill took the opportunity this presented to offer some thanks of his own. "Speaking of gifts, please thank your father for me Harry. He provided a portkey so our brother Charlie could travel from Romania to spend Christmas with us. You can't imagine how happy my mother is that the entire family will be together over the holidays, it certainly made her Christmas."

The arrival of the twins instantly introduced some of the the chaos they were rapidly gaining a reputation for. This time though, all present thought the chaos was unintentional. "Hey everyone, hi Little Snitch - what brings you here?"

"That dress tells me your not here to greet your handsome twin brothers...ouch!"

Ginny's shoe had connected with Fred's shin. "Horrible twin brothers more like..."

Hermione's laughter stopped the assault becoming more serious. "Oh Ginny, you're going to fit right in. We'll look forward to seeing you at Hogwarts. Let's go guys, mum and dad will be waiting and the car's probably on the meter."

As the trio was leaving, the Weasleys all heard Padma address Harry. "Please tell me you had no idea what that last bit meant either?" His shake of the head surprisingly appeared to reassure the young witch.

A pair of eyes with a lot more experienced at observing people than Ginny's had also carefully watched events on the platform unfold, but with far more sinister motives and intentions. Lucius was looking for potential victims to pass the diary on to, and had quickly discovered he was spoilt for choice. His plan called for the chosen victim to be one of two things, either a person close to the boy or someone holding a grudge.

He preferred the first option, imagining Crow's distress as someone close to him became enveloped in darkness, but wasn't prepared to cross anything out at the moment. The Chinese girl fawning over the boy and being spurned put her on the list of possibles, as did the youngest Weasley practically passing-out when meeting the boy. Lucius well remembered her brother threatening to blow his head off, and her father was also near the top of his shit list.



The young Bones bitch was also clearly on friendly terms, and simultaneously getting back at her aunt would be a really sweet revenge. That particular choice of victim would certainly have to be classed as a high risk strategy though, one that could easily come back to bite him on the arse. Amelia Bones was no fool, something that would have to be considered before making his final decision.

His three closest friends would clearly be Lucius' best bet, though each came with their own particular problems. The mudblood would surely cause Crow the most distress but Lucius was loath to admit he wouldn't have a clue how to even find her, never mind slip the diary into her possession. She wasn't being discarded just yet but that particular outcome would require a great deal more luck rather than his careful planning. Longbottom would practically fit into the same category, Augusta was renowned for never letting her grandson out of her sight. The Indian witch was one he would need to garner more information on, and his source just walked up to him.

"Come Draco, time to go home."

The young indian witch in question was currently congratulating her friend on how she'd handled the Weasley situation.

Now that it was just them, Hermione was free to rant. "It's bad enough having older witches hanging over Harry, now I'm going to have to put up with younger ones making 'doe eyes' at him too!"

"It could be worse Hermione, at least it's only witches hanging over me." Harry's face as he made that remark had both his friends laughing. It was a happy trio who made their way through the portal to what what was another world for two of them.

Bill wanted to know how his sister was feeling. "I'm fine Bill, though no thanks to these jokers. I can't wait to get my wand and then a few people are going to see some payback."

This started Bill laughing, or rather the fear in his twin brothers eyes did. "I know some good curses Ginny, and promise to teach you before you head to Hogwarts. At least it seems as if you've made some friends before you get there?"

Ginny's blush was back in full force. "I thought he looked good in that picture on the front page of today's Prophet, he's far more handsome in real life..."

"Oh I think I'm going to be sick..."

Bill was in like a shot, he'd worked too hard to get Ginny to this stage to let anyone's jealousy ruin it now. "That's probably because you've been eating like a pig again Ronnie. Harry's on the front page of the Prophet for returning a priceless founders artefact to Hogwarts, and you're still on probation for another six months. If your sister wants to make friends with them, that is her business. Any Weasley who has a problem with that will have to take it up with me. I'm going to be keeping a close eye on her at Hogwarts."

Fred was trying to atone for his earlier screw-up with his sister. "Hey, Harry's a friend of ours, why would we have a problem with that?"

"Yeah, we heard he held a great party last night for all the first years - except Ron here. Why would we have any problems with the boy who got us out of Snape's class? Em, sorry about earlier Ginny..."

Her smile let them know they were off the hook.

When Percy had finally said goodbye to his girlfriend, the Weasleys portkeyed to the Burrow.

-oOoOo-

Padma was lying in bed trying to get her head around the things she'd seen, things the Grangers took for granted. Harry had never tasted Indian food, so they all decided that's what they would have tonight. Out came a menu and choices were made, it was the next bit that blew her mind.

Simply by picking up something called a telephone, their order was soon delivered to the house. Here were dishes her mother would work all day to prepare, sealed in containers and delivered right to your table. As if that wasn't enough of a jolt, discovering that the same service was available for most of the world's cuisines by simply punching different numbers into the telephone almost put her into shock.

A light knock at the door saw Hermione enter. "Everything okay Padma?"

Hermione was sitting on the bed beside her before Padma had sorted out her reply. "I'm beginning to appreciate just how big a shock it must have been for you, and even Harry, entering the magical world. Thank goodness staying in Crawley comes without the drama that you two provide in Hogwarts, I think we could all do with a break from that. Your mum and dad are great too, Harry fairly gets on well with them?"

Her friends slight blush was still there, even behind the wide smile. "Mum simply adores Harry, the fact that he has me exercising and learning defence put him straight into dad's good books too. I'm glad you like it here. Apart from that surprise weekend with Harry, this is the first time I've actually had friends staying."

"Well snap, this is also the first time I've ever stayed with friends." Both girls hugged at that before Hermione headed out the room, Padma couldn't resist a parting shot before her friend left. "Are you now going to tuck Harry in?"

Hermione though was getting used to her friend's teasing, and decided to tease right back at her. "I don't think that's a good idea. Last time I did that, we ended up spending the night together. Goodnight Padma." She went to bed with a satisfied grin on her face, Hermione though Padma's look of utter shock was worth the grilling that would surely follow tomorrow.

Padma was desperate to ask Hermione for details but the girl was long gone before she got her brain back in gear. Apart from experiencing a whole new world, she was finding her friend was this whole different girl away from Hogwarts. Padma wanted this holiday to be an experience, and so far she was anything but disappointed.

-oOoOo-

Amelia Bones was also having a new experience, walking into Gringotts wearing her new brooch saw her approached at once and led straight to Harry's father's office. No queueing, no surly teller, just courteously accompanied where she needed to go. After the introductions, Barchoke immediately got down to business.

"Let me start by apologising for involving our children in this. Unfortunately, I didn't really have any other options. Circumstances have provided me with proof of major corruption at the very highest levels of the Ministry of Magic, I really had no where else to turn."

Amelia was instantly on guard, wondering just what game was being played here. "Can I see this proof, and ask how you came to have it?"

"We were carrying out an investigation about an entirely different matter, and this just fell into our laps." Barchoke had removed a folder from his desk and now slid it across to a wary Head of the DMLE.

She cautiously opened the folder and felt as if she had been physically struck by the photographs displayed there. Barty Crouch was sitting having dinner with his son, a son who supposedly died over a decade ago. Barty Jr had clearly aged from the young man she remembered but his identity was undeniable. The picture of him laying on a bed before being covered by an invisibility cloak was particularly telling, and somewhat explained how he could be kept hidden for so long.

"I must asked how you obtained these pictures, and why?"

Barchoke had expected nothing less. "We employed Miss Skeeter to investigate the trial of Sirius Black, Mr Crouch was instrumental in this process. In her own inimitable style, she practically fell over this deceit." He deliberately didn't mention Sirius' innocence, or even lack of a trial. If Amelia Bones was half the witch he thought she was, discovering Sirius never received the due process of law should see her heading back to Gringotts, if only to find out just what the hell they were up to. There was also a danger of pushing too hard too soon, one terrifying revelation at a time would do for now.

"We were as shocked as you clearly are by this development but left unsure who to approach, whether Mr Crouch was working alone in getting his son out of Azkaban was our main concern. That this feat has never been achieved before suggested there were others involved, and left us second guessing what our next move should be. Had we contacted the wrong person, his son could simply disappear and relations between our nations could disintegrate to an all time low."

Amelia understood that would be her main problem, how to catch Barty in the act without tipping her hand. One sniff of an investigation and Barty Jr would never be found, how the hell was she then supposed to organise a search for a dead man? These pictures alone wouldn't be enough to bring Crouch down, all he would have to do was claim they were faked and ask for further proof. Without that further proof, they were screwed. This led Amelia to ask the obvious question.

"What is your interest in Sirius Black?"

This Barchoke was able to answer with total honesty. "We recently discovered he is Harry's godfather."

Amelia's 'Oh Shit!' was in recognition that her task just got even more complicated. Apart from the goblin involvement, throwing in the names of Sirius Black, James and Lily Potter and of course the boy-who-lived just dictated she was going to have a very busy Christmas.

A/N thanks for reading

## Chapter 20

Christmas Eve with the Grangers had been planned to the last detail. After breakfast, they were all heading into London to spend the day sightseeing - with definitely some shopping along the way. Harry slipping Padma some spending cash would have gone unnoticed if the girl hadn't throw her arms around him in thanks. Dan and Emma were intending to pick up the tab for everything today though, having saved a small fortune by switching their banking to Gringotts.

They began at the Marble Arch end of Oxford Street, admiring the Christmas lights and the stores. By the time they were having their lunch in a fast food outlet at Oxford Circus, Padma and Harry had been supplied with multiple items of muggle clothing from the many stores they had stopped in. Padma was a bit like a kid in a sweet shop, her eyes never stopped moving as she attempted to take everything in, while Emma was still struggling with the concept that all their shopping was currently stored in the book-bag Harry wore.

Hermione and Harry were delighted to be eating burgers, it meant that they could still hold hands while having their lunch. The crowds on Oxford Street made their usual activity of walking arm in arm really difficult, Hermione solved the problem by grabbing his hand. Both had enjoyed the contact and the only time they had been separated since was when one of them went into a changing room to try on clothes.

The sightseeing / shopping continued down Regent Street to Piccadilly Circus, from there it was a short hop to Trafalgar Square and the biggest Christmas Tree in London. The antique nativity scene in the glassed-in display also took some explaining before they headed off down The Strand.

Somerset House is a magnificent building, seeing many uses in its four hundred and fifty year history. It could be argued that one of the worst uses was as an Inland Revenue office - nobody likes to pay taxes. There could be no argument though that the group were seeing it at one of its best today.

An ice rink filled the lower courtyard, with sparkling lights, hanging decorations and a beautiful Christmas Tree all adding to the strikingly festive sight. There were small decorated huts selling wares and a large cafe spread along one entire side of the rink. It

was to here Dan and Emma gravitated while Hermione dragged her two now reluctant friends toward the skate hire kiosk.

Both parents sipped their hot chocolate while watching the trio take to the ice. Hermione had skated since she was about seven so had no trouble on the slippery surface. Harry's grace and athleticism seemed to help as he soon mastered the basics of staying upright. Poor Padma though appeared to spend more time on her bum than actually skating. Now that Harry was mobile, he and Hermione each took one of Padma's arms and the trio were soon making their wobbly way around the rink.

The three friends who later ran up to Dan and Emma all wore that look only achievable by kids having fun in the cold - red cheeks, sparkling eyes and wide smiles. After more hot chocolate all round, they then made their way over to Covent Garden where Dan had already reservations booked at a lovely Italian restaurant. It was a happy and certainly full bunch who caught the train back to Crawley.

It was on the train home Hermione asked a question that had just occurred to her. "Mum, dad, are we going to church tonight?"

Emma and Dan had talked this over, and decided to give it a miss. "No honey, with Harry and Padma not celebrating Christmas, we were..."

Dan never got to say any more as Harry interrupted. "Excuse me, Dan, please don't change your normal celebrations because of us. We would both be delighted to come along - that's if we're allowed?"

Hermione squeezed his hand, since it was still held in hers. "Everyone's allowed in church, Harry. We usually go to the midnight service on Christmas Eve, do you really want to come?"

It was actually Padma who answered. "I certainly want to go, I hope to experience as much of this way of life as possible."

Plans were quickly made to go home and just chill for a few hours before getting ready for church, Hermione was soon advising both her friends what clothes they had bought today would be suitable for the occasion. An occasion they were now all looking forward to.

-oOoOo-

Amelia wasn't looking forward to telling Susan she was going to be working over Christmas. She had really missed her niece since the young witch left for Hogwarts, and was not happy about missing Christmas with her only family. That had also been her dilemma when arranging her response to those photographs. Amelia needed people she could trust at her side but also required the entire situation to be kept ultra quiet. If someone had a spouse and kids, keeping it quiet that they had a mission on Christmas Day would be so much harder to do. Gossip like that would be all over the ministry in no time.

This led her to take the potentially dangerous decision of keeping her team small, she was banking heavily on the element of surprise. Amelia had no intention of telling her team of just four aurors what they were going to be doing, not until they were ready to leave on the actual mission.

The Head of the DMLE understood she was putting her career on the line here. Barty would demand, and certainly get, her head on a silver platter if she didn't pull this off properly. They needed to catch Barty Junior or she was ruined. That the same convicted, and supposedly deceased, death eater assisted in placing two aurors in the permanent spell damage ward of St. Mungo's was all the motivation Amelia needed to undertake this high risk plan. Frank and Alice Longbottom never got the chance to sit and have dinner with their boy, she fully intended that the Crouch father and son would both pay for their crimes.

She had also taken Barchoke's answer to heart and did some quiet digging herself into the trial of Sirius Black, Amelia was astonished to find - absolutely nothing! She didn't want to alert anyone until they had both young and old Barty wrapped up but Amelia certainly intended looking into the matter further once that was achieved.

A quiet word with Minerva regarding Barchoke's character had produced a surprisingly positive result. The Hogwarts Deputy Headmistress' answer of 'a devoted father who would do anything to help and protect his son' was rather unexpected. She needed to know just how Sirius Black fitted into this picture, and exactly what the goblins were actually after.

-oOoOo-



They were making their way home from church, an occasion Harry and Padma had thoroughly enjoyed. "I really liked the nativity play, it helped explain things I was struggling with. The children seemed to have such fun doing it too."

The mischief was twinkling in Dan's eyes as he couldn't resist a gentle jibe. "Didn't Hermione tell you, Harry? She made her acting debut in the church nativity play a few years ago..."

"Daaad, I was six!"

This memory had Emma smiling, "Yes, but even then Hermione knew what she wanted. She was cast as one of the three wise men, but insisted it should be a wise woman."

Any teasing to be done and Padma wanted to be part of it, she did decide to cut Hermione a break though. "It could have been worse, Hermione. That wee boy who was supposed to be a sheep spent the entire time waving to his mum and dad, I had to bite my lip to save from laughing."

Harry also came to his best friend's rescue. "Well I would love to have seen Hermione in the play, and think she was right about the wise woman bit too."

Emma thought this was really cute but Dan liked his mischief. "Oh don't worry, Harry, we have plenty of pictures of Hermione in the play - along with Hundreds of others you should see..."

"Daaaad..." was soon followed by the sound of laughter, this looked like being a very merry Christmas in the Granger household.

-oOoOo-

Harry was wakened by a hyper-excited Hermione bouncing on his bed. "I know we weren't going to exercise today but I woke at our usual time and am far too excited to go back to sleep. Merry Christmas, Harry." She bent and kissed his cheek at that, causing both of them to blush.

Unsure of what to say, Harry fell back on routine. "You want to practice swords in the back garden?"

By way of an answer, Hermione gave him a hug before shooting out the room to change into appropriate clothing.

Dan was dragged from his slumber by the unusual sound of thwack - thwack noises emanating from the back garden, he hauled himself from his nice warm bed to look out the window. He was still standing there ten minutes later when his wife's arms snaked around his waist from behind, her 'Merry Christmas' went unanswered.

He couldn't take his eyes off their daughter. "I can't believe that's the same girl we sent off to school in September, she seems to have grown so much..."

"Probably because she has, mainly in confidence. I think she's going to grow into an outstanding young woman, with friends who will be there for her throughout the journey."

They watched fascinated as the pair swapped between defence and offence, probing for weaknesses in their opponents. Hermione had always been a willing pupil at anything she put her mind to, watching the concentration on her face as she parried and shielded Harry's attacks was something to behold. It was compulsive viewing and kept both Grangers at the window until they were finished exercising. Now it was time to get breakfast ready before they settled down for presents.

-oOoOo-

Susan was also up early, she wanted to have some time with her aunt before they both had to leave. She was heading over to spend Christmas Day with her best friend, Hannah's parents knew from long experience not to ask too many questions as to why her Aunt Amelia had to go into the ministry today.

Harry had told Susan his father wouldn't have used the word 'urgent' if it hadn't been very important, a sense of urgency would be the best way to describe auntie since her return from Gringotts. The young Hufflepuff had watched with the rest of the class that day Harry had taken down Lucius Malfoy, she had no doubt both Harry and her aunt were on the same side. Susan knew she was being selfish but she just wished the good guys could at least get Christmas Day off, surely that wasn't too much to ask?

-oOoOo-

The friends were taking turns passing out the gifts they'd gotten for each other, Padma started the proceedings and Hermione now found herself the proud owner of an ultra brightly coloured Indian silk wrap skirt. Harry received a toy armoured knight figure, resplendent on a toy horse, this saw him laugh with pleasure before telling Padma he loved it.

Hermione was incredibly nervous over her gift to Harry. What do you get for your best friend who's the goblin who has everything was such a strange request, she was practically unique in facing a problem like this. Harry had unwrapped her present and was now staring at it with an expression she didn't recognise. Hermione couldn't take the suspense any more and started to babble.

"I didn't know what to get you... The clothes seemed too impersonal... Then Professor Snape went and stole my thunder... Do you hate it, Harry?"

Hermione had gotten him a lovely shirt and a nice pair of black jeans, it was the book on top though that held all his attention. She'd christened it 'the book of Hermione', because that's basically what it was. Here was his best friend in all her glory, from an infant right up until they had their picture taken on the steps of Gringotts. Each picture had at least a paragraph explaining the where, when and what was going on in the picture - all in Hermione's beautiful handwriting. The amount of thought and effort she had clearly lavished on this gift just blew Harry away.

He raised his eyes from his gift to see Hermione almost hyperventilating with anxiety, his wide smile soon put a stop to her fretting. "It's fantastic, Hermione, I love it."

Padma also really liked her jeans and t-shirt from Hermione before they moved on to Harry's presents. A silver Ravenclaw eagle charm on a chain of the same material was much admired and appreciated by Padma.

Emma was 'oh-ing' and 'ah-ing' over the pyramid Harry had given her and Dan, without having the slightest clue what it was. "Oh mum,

that's wonderful. Did you include that memory crystal Professor Hobson showed us, Harry?"

"That, and a few others. I thought your mum and dad might like to see inside Hogwarts." This earned him a hug from Emma as he nervously waited on Hermione opening her gift.

The witch in question was also nervous, the parcel was long and quite heavy. Her hands were shaking as she stripped back the wrapping to reveal - a sword. It was a bejewelled work of art that was certainly shorter than Harry's, and Hermione didn't know quite what to say.

Padma gave her time to recover. "I'll say this for you, Harry, you have definitely got your own sense of style. Most boys giving jewels would have them mounted in a necklace or at least earrings, not embedded into the hilt of a sword. Practical and beautiful at the same time, it fits our Hermione perfectly."

"She's a friend of our nation and is entitled to wear her own blade. The last non-goblin to own a blade like that was Godric Gryffindor."

Hermione had unsheathed her sword and was twirling the weapon around, looking to see if her name was on the blade. It was an embarrassed Harry who answered her unasked question. "They wouldn't put an unmarried female's name on the blade, rather wait until her name changed after her wedding."

"Harry, it's beautiful and feels amazingly balanced in my hand." Spotting the concerned looks her parents were wearing, Hermione tried to put their minds at rest. "Dad, goblin females learn to use weapons purely so they can defend themselves. They aren't allowed to become warriors or fight in a war."

"I am so glad to hear that Hermione. It's a beautiful gift, but also deadly. I hope you'll be careful with it?"

As usual, it was Padma who tried to lighten the mood. "I'm now going to have to walk around Hogwarts with two of them carrying swords, I suppose that beats being woken up by listening to them practice first thing in the morning. Can neither of you two give normal a try?" Both her friends smiled at her gentle teasing, knowing

that she was deliberately making light of a situation that could have become awkward.

Hermione thanked Harry for her gift, before showing her parents how to operate the goblin viewer. They were bowled over by the scene from the steps of Gringotts.

-oOoOo-

Barty Crouch was on his knees in front of the fire, talking to Amelia Bones on the floo. Apparently some Bulgarians had been partying and almost started a riot in the Leaky Caldron by offering celebratory toasts after one of them cast the dark mark. The problem was they spoke very little English, though one of them managed to communicate enough to claim to be the son of the Bulgarian Minister of Magic. They really needed to interview them before the situation escalated into an international incident. Barty could clearly see Amelia was at home, and her Christmas was being ruined too. He had just agreed to go into the ministry when the windows suddenly imploded, Barty whirled around and froze in surprise as Amelia Bones jumped through the shattered frames before firing a stunner at him.

"Shack, go! Your team upstairs while we sweep down here. Auror Tonks, keep that floo connection open and monitor the situation."

Amelia and Mad-eye were in full auror garb as they rushed through the downstairs portion of the house. For Amelia, arriving in the kitchen and seeing the table set for two was a big boost. The head of the aurors swiped her hand over each of the chairs and felt elated when it smacked into something solid. She closed her hand over the invisibility cloak and dragged it off, much to the distress of a now sobbing house elf.

"Barty Crouch Junior, you are under arrest." Amelia then stunned the unresponsive wizard for good measure before producing magic inhibiting cuffs.

"Mad-eye, get Shack and Gawain back down here - and make sure Barty Senior is going nowhere without us. Tell Tonks to head for the ministry and wait for us there, I want these two questioned today before anyone can interfere."

Amelia could feel the adrenalin coursing through her veins, she was getting too old for this shit. Jumping through blasted out windows was a game for younger aurors, but it had worked perfectly. Seeing two Amelia Bones' had frozen Barty for the second they needed to take him out. She'd noticed Mad-eye hit him with a stunner too as they passed, all her team now knew what was at stake here today and were determined there would be no slip-ups.

Phase one had been a resounding success, now all they needed to do was discover just how far the corruption had spread in the ministry. They weren't out of the woods yet, they could all still find themselves without jobs before the New Year if enough of the wrong people were implicated in this.

-oOoOo-

Dan and Emma were sitting enthralled as they watched the kids' potions class. Both had done their fair share of chemistry labs as they went through university but this was something else. Yes they were using cauldrons but the precision needed for the ingredient preparation and brewing was a million miles away from making a pot of soup. Here was a branch of magic they could understand - sort of!

They were interrupted by a couple of Gringotts owls delivering a rather large book that contained details of the Potter properties. This had Hermione really excited. "Oh wonderful, now we can look through your houses and start planning where we want to go this summer..."

Padma couldn't help but notice the Potter crest on the front of the book, she was also a pureblood and the hat didn't sort her into Ravenclaw for nothing. "Harry, how can you access these? Don't you need to be head of your family first?" The hush that descended with that question worried Padma. "Guys, you know I can keep my mouth shut. This is obviously something you don't want made public."

"Padma, you know we trust you but this just brought up something I hadn't thought of. How to invite you and Neville on holiday with us, without alerting the world that I've taken on my head of house."

"Does this mean you've made your choice, Harry?"

"No Padma, it just means that I'm the only one who can make that choice. My father didn't want anyone attempting to gain control of me, with the Potter family ring on my finger that can't happen now."

"I won't say a word Harry..."

This drew a smile, "I know, Padma, I have no worries about that. Now that you do know, can I have a word with you - in private?"

Emma watched as Harry led Padma out into the back garden, here was her first chance since this morning to talk to her daughter alone. "You ok love? To say the least, a rather unusual present Harry got you."

Her daughter smiled back at her, "Not for a goblin mum. I know it's easy to forget but that's who Harry is. His most prized possession is his knife, it never leaves him. Its sheath is charmed to be invisible so you can't see it even when he has his sleeveless tunic on."

She glanced over to where Moonlight was lying on his back, amusing himself by swiping at one of the lower baubles on the Christmas tree. "He got my birthday absolutely perfect, and my sword is practically a work of art. Would you like to bet it's worth a small fortune too..."

Both had stopped as Dan now joined them in staring out the window. Whatever Harry had said to Padma, she was clearly upset. Harry opening his arms and the now sobbing witch throwing herself into them was puzzling too. It finally hit Hermione just what was happening here.

"Damn, damn, damn..."

"Hermione, care to enlighten your poor, ignorant parents just what the hell is going on out there?"

"I'm only guessing dad but Harry told Padma he was head of House Potter, then asked for a quiet word. Whatever that word was, Padma is clearly distraught - though not upset with Harry."

Since the girl was currently clinging to him as if her life depended on it, their daughter's analysis was hard to refute. It still didn't tell them

anything though. "Please tell us something we don't know, Hermione."

"I'm only guessing mum, but I think Harry's just told Padma he's turning down the marriage contract her father offered."

"What! They're both only eleven."

"I know mum, pureblood customs means Harry has to deal with the situation as soon as possible, once Padma knew he was head of House Potter. She obviously didn't know her father had offered her hand in marriage."

"That's barbaric..."

"It's different from what we believe, dad, but it's their custom. Don't some muggle cultures still have arranged marriages today? We come across differences like this all the time between us, using words like 'barbaric' doesn't help us understand our friends' point of view. I certainly don't want you arranging a husband for me, it doesn't mean I'm going to lose my friends because their parents might do that for them."

Hermione felt her mother's arms wrap around her, "When did you get so wise?"

"When I was six, and had to wear that stupid costume..."

All three smiled at that, and watched the young man comfort his friend in their garden. When he finally led Padma back into the house, she flew right into Hermione's arms and the two girls held each other tightly.

"I didn't know, Hermione, I swear I didn't know."

"It's okay, Padma, it was easy to see you didn't." Hermione could feel the tension leave her friend at that.

"Harry was brilliant with me, Hermione, that could have been really terrible but he made everything okay. He really is something, hold onto him."

"We'll all hold on to each other, Padma, we're all friends."



Harry approached both girls, unsure of how his actions would be received. "Are we okay?"

He suddenly found himself with two witches holding onto him. "Of course we are, Harry, now we can have our Christmas dinner and then figure out where we're all going on holiday this summer - also how to get Padma and Neville there too."

"Oh Harry, I just remembered something, my father really wanted to meet you. It makes more sense now, though I can't figure out why he offered me instead of Parvati?" The blush on Harry's face told its own story. "He offered betrothal contracts for both of us?"

Harry didn't answer that particular question but wasn't fooling anyone. "Providing he doesn't know I'm now head of House Potter, I can refer all matters like that to my father."

Emma had a question she was dying to ask, well actually a few questions. "Is it customary for the girl not to know that her father had offered a betrothal contract on her?"

Padma answered as best she could. "I don't really know, Emma. Pureblood society is very male dominated, and even more so where I come from. My father's word is law in our household, to disobey him would bring shame to our family. At least I now know why he so readily agreed to me coming here..."

The mother tried not to let her shock show at that. Thankfully Dan appeared as horrified as she was with this news, the Granger household was most certainly a partnership - not a dictatorship. "I was just wondering if some of these girls who kept approaching Harry knew they were offered as betrothals by their fathers?"

"That would certainly explain some of the more persistent ones, do you know if they are, Harry?"

"Sorry, Hermione, I only glanced down the list once last summer - and the names meant nothing to me at the time. I only remembered Padma's because they were twins, my goblin upbringing dismissed that option immediately."

This sounded something that Dan wanted to hear. "Why would your upbringing automatically rule that out?" Glares from his wife and daughter soon had him explaining further. "I'm not attempting to be judgemental here, just gather information on different cultures."

"Goblins only have one mate, Dan, and that mate is for life. My father's wife died in childbirth, with his baby son passing soon after. He wouldn't even consider taking another wife - no goblin would."

This drew a smile from the dentist. "Those views are pretty close to the ones we hold Harry, that was the only reason I asked. Hermione has entered this whole other world where everything appears different. Like you, we're trying to understand as much as we can about those differences."

Emma thought the entire day needed rescuing to get back to the fun they were having. "One of those differences is Christmas dinner, I'm pleased and also terrified that I'm cooking the first Christmas dinner for both of you." She was laughing at this but still rather nervous. She'd asked Hermione if her friends had any special dietary requirements, only to be told they ate whatever was in front of them. It would soon be time to see if that was true.

-oOoOo-

Cornelius was not a happy minister. Only Amelia telling him that if he didn't come to the ministry immediately, he may not be the minister much longer, got him up from his Christmas dinner. There was no Christmas cheer as he greeted his Head of DMLE in her office.

"Amelia, this better be good or you could find yourself back on an auror patrol."

"Cornelius, if we don't get this right, both of us could be out on our ear by the New Year." She handed him one of the pictures Barchoke had supplied, and watched the colour drain out his face.

"Is this genuine?"

"Since I have both of them currently in our cells, the answer would have to be yes."

Watching the Minister for Magic panicking was not a pretty sight. "We have to contain this, Amelia, it could bring down the ministry..."

"I totally disagree, minister, containing it could cause us a lot more problems. I was given that picture by a goblin..."

"The goblins have no bearing on this - who cares what they say."

"The boy-who-lived, especially since he calls the goblin who gave me this father."

After Cornelius had taken a much needed seat, Amelia explained what they had already discovered. "We immediately questioned the prisoners using truth serum, I needed to know who else in the ministry was involved in this. Thankfully, the answer was absolutely no one. Barty's dying wife extracted a promise that he would get their son out of Azkaban. It was her who took her son's place and died in his cell - still under the influence of polyjuice potion. Barty has since kept his son in line by repeated use of the imperius curse."

The minister let out a huge sigh of relief. Crouch's guilt was undeniable, and the ministry were mostly in the clear. That was until the obvious question hit him. "How and why did this photograph end up in goblin hands?"

"Barchoke told me they were carrying out an investigation into the trial of Sirius Black. I did some quiet digging myself and couldn't discover anything. Questioning Barty gave me the answer. I couldn't find anything because there was nothing to find, Sirius Black was sent to Azkaban without a trial."

That wasn't what worried Cornelius, rather the reasons behind the goblin investigation. "Did you ask why they were enquiring about Black?"

"I did, and you won't like it anymore than I did." Amelia went over to a sideboard in her office and poured a couple of brandies from the decanter she had there. She handed one to Cornelius before giving him the bad news.

"Sirius Black is Harry Potter's godfather."

The minister was grateful for the brandy, it fought off some of the icy chill that had just crept up his spine. "Please tell me you have some good news for me, Amelia - or at least some idea how we get ourselves out of this one?"

"My Susan told me what happened at the leaving feast. I'm surprised you let Dumbledore con you into that Cornelius?"

This change of tack threw the minister. "What do you mean?"

"Harry may attend Hogwarts Cornelius, but we heard from Dumbledore's own lips that the boy will have nothing to do with him. He was trying to use your presence to ingratiate himself with the boy, Harry's answer was predictable to anyone who even slightly knows the lad. It also was no surprise to me that the rest of his yearmates followed him out of the hall - or that he had made provisions for them doing so."

"Are you saying Albus was using me?"

"Albus Dumbledore uses everyone for his own ends, that the famous boy-who-lived won't even be in the same room as him must be driving the old coot crazy. The goblins declared Dumbledore persona non grata over a decade ago, Harry may consider himself a goblin but he also has his own personal reasons for doing the same. I don't want to see the ministry pulled into Dumbledore's mess, and think I know how to avoid it."

Amelia laid out the basis of her proposal. "We play everything in public - and strictly by the book. This would also include a public trial for Sirius Black." She held up her hand to stop the minister's expected protest at that course of action.

"On Halloween, Black had two goblin visitors. The security guard ensured they signed in and out, their names were Barchoke and Old Crow. It would appear Harry not only visited his parents' graves on Halloween, he also slipped off to visit his godfather in Azkaban."

This information was hard for Cornelius to believe. "The boy who lived was in Azkaban, and we weren't informed?"

"He kept his hood up and spoke gobbledygook - he wasn't recognised as anything other than another goblin. What we have to

recognise though is that they have been at least one step ahead of everyone, no matter what some people have tried. The logs show they spent over an hour with Black, it can be no coincidence that they then started an investigation into how Black ended up in Azkaban. We're dealing with the results of that investigation today."

"Amelia, surely you're not suggesting Black is anything other than guilty?"

"I really can't imagine them expending all this effort just to get Black's Azkaban sentence legally confirmed. Neither of us had anything to do with him ending up in Azkaban but we've just been given the perfect opportunity to align your ministry firmly on the boy-who-lived's good side. You call an emergency meeting of the Wizengamot for tomorrow, I'll get Black and the boy here. Let Harry and his father see justice being done, and whether Black is innocent or guilty doesn't really matter in terms of the ministry's relationship with the boy - it's win / win for us."

Cornelius was finally getting it. "If Black is innocent we get to set him free - and share no blame in him being sent there. If he's guilty, then we can ask the boy's opinion on an appropriate punishment. Both Crouches should really face a dementor for their crimes and the ministry can claim it's tough new stance on law and order is paying dividends. Are you sure you can get the boy here?"

"That shouldn't be a problem, what I need you to do is avoid telling anyone, especially Dumbledore, just what we're up to. Let's keep to an official statement that an emergency has arisen that needs to be dealt with immediately. Dragging out the two Crouches should satisfy them on that count. After their trial, we can announce the irregularity that's now been thrown up and try Sirius Black directly after the Crouches."

It was a pensive Minister of Magic who agreed to Amelia's proposals. "The minimum amount of notice that can be given for an emergency meeting is two hours, I'll send out notification first thing in the morning and set the meeting for ten thirty. Will you be able to accomplish everything you need to do in that time?"

Amelia was thinking of sending Shack and Tonks to Azkaban to collect Black, Mad-eye and Gawain could take it in shifts to sit on the prisoners while she headed for Gringotts. "We should manage, I'll

leave you to enjoy the rest of your Christmas, Cornelius - it should be quite the Boxing Day."

-oOoOo-

After a lovely dinner, they had all sat around the table and studied the Potter properties. Dan had liberated a giant children's map of the world out the loft and temporarily had it hanging in the dining room, it had once adorned Hermione's bedroom wall in their daughter's younger years. That same witch currently had a handful of colour stickers and was placing them on the map at Potter property locations the group really wanted to visit. The problem was, even being really choosy, they already had six stickers on the map with about half the book still to go.

"Harry, I now understand why my father offered both my sister and I as brides. The Patils would be classed as quite well off but Merlin, this is something else. The extent of the Potter wealth has never been made public, always only hinted at, seeing proof of it here is kinda overwhelming. No wonder there's a lot more betrothal contracts with your name on them out there."

This was confusing to Emma, "Is it really all about wealth, Padma?"

"Well, to my father, he values breeding, power and wealth. The Potters are an ancient, respected family. That gives them a lot of power, without even taking into account their incredible wealth. People like Malfoy want you to lick their boots and acknowledge them as your betters, yet they couldn't muster even a tenth of what Harry would seem to have available."

The boy in question was actually getting embarrassed at the way the conversation was turning, and attempted to change it back to happier subjects. "Let's leave pureblood politics out of it tonight, Padma, I'm having too much fun looking through things my family own. My mum and dad might even have visited some of these. Now who wants to vote on a private island in the Maldives?"

Emma's hand was actually shaking as she pulled the book over toward her to see this one better, Hermione was already putting a sticker over the islands on the map. Everyone halted what they were doing as there was a knock at the kitchen door, Dan left but was soon back with Barchoke.

It was greetings all round before the goblin got down to business. "Harry, we're going to see your godfather tomorrow morning."

Hermione was soon at Harry's side with her arm around him and her head resting on his shoulder. "Even the thought of you visiting Azkaban scares the life out me Harry."

Barchoke gave a deep, throaty chuckle. "Don't worry, Hermione, we're not going anywhere near Azkaban. Harry and I are heading for the Ministry of Magic, Sirius has a trial in front of the Wizengamot tomorrow."

A loud whoop from Harry saw Hermione hoisted into the air, and also earned a comment from Padma. "Ok, forget all about giving normal a try. How about letting me in on what's going on?"

-oOoOo-

Christmas Day was just like all the other days of the year for the inmates of Azkaban. Festive was not a word that could ever be used to describe the atmosphere on the island, there was also a distinct lack of cheer. All that was about to change for one inmate. The cell door opened and Senior Auror Shackbolt performed his duty.

"Sirius Black, you're coming with us. You will be tried for your crimes in front of the entire Wizengamot, and under the influence of truth serum, tomorrow morning."

The haggard figure's reply was somewhat unexpected.

"About bloody time!"

A/N thanks for reading

A/N 2 posting this slightly early to save some of my readers having to get up in the middle of the night!

## Chapter 21

Albus was in a foul mood as he entered the Wizengamot chamber, his Christmas had been anything but merry. He'd tried to use the holiday to sway Hogwarts staff over to his way of thinking about the boy-who-lived, with absolutely no success. All had robustly rebuffed his ideas, with Professor Hobson getting so angry she began shouting at him in Swedish. Even Severus had point blank refused to put his fledgling relationship with the boy in jeopardy for the sake of the greater good.

Now the Chief Warlock found himself summoned to a meeting, with not the slightest idea what was on the agenda. This was adding to his bad mood, a bad mood he intended to lighten by sharing it around. It was way beyond time that Albus reminded people he was the most powerful wizard in the country.

The most powerful wizard in the country was ready to blow his top after spotting Harry and his father sitting in the front row of the public gallery. Watching Miss Bones join the pair left Albus feeling that he wasn't going to enjoy today either. If Cornelius had started listening to Amelia Bones, then Albus anticipated trouble. There was just no give in the stern witch, she tended to see things in terms of black and white or, even worse, lawful / unlawful.

Seeing Amelia arrive in the chamber, alongside the minister, just seemed to confirm his worst fears. Albus decided to get this show on the road. He stood and banged his gavel to bring the chamber to order, not even trying to hide his displeasure at the situation he found himself in. "Fellow Wizengamot members, I bid you welcome to this emergency meeting. Normally I would now announce our agenda but, since I haven't been informed of why we've all been ordered here, I must now pass you over to the one who called this meeting. Please take the floor, Minister Fudge."

The minister slowly rose, knowing every eye was now on him. Cornelius understood this was his moment to shine, and intended to make the most of it. "Fellow Wizengamot members, I would first like to apologise for disturbing your holiday - and for the secrecy that surrounds this meeting today. I can assure everyone of the necessity of both, and I am confident you will agree with me when you discover why we are here. This emergency meeting is all about



justice, and that's what I intend to see carried out here today. Aurors, bring in the prisoners."

Senior Aurors Shacklebolt and Robards led both father and son Bartemiuses into the chamber, a chamber that had descended into uproar. A cannon blast noise spell from Amelia got everyone's attention.

"We will have order here, and we will see justice done. This ministry has nothing to hide and all your questions will be answered before we even consider passing sentence. I think the entire chamber recognises that one of these prisoners has already been convicted of heinous crimes, I feel no need to rake over that painful ground again here today. That judgement and sentence still stands."

Amelia watched as Augusta Longbottom regained control of her emotions, and nodded her thanks for that. This would be painful enough without having to relive Frank and Alice's torture.

That nothing was going to be swept under the rug seemed to appease the Wizengamot, for now. They would wait and see how things went before passing judgement on the Crouch family.

Shack applied the truth serum to Barty Senior and led him through the story of how his son came to be chained into the seat beside him. The chamber listened, enraptured as the tragic tale of an embittered man and loving mother descended into criminality. Barty brought his story right up to date by informing the chamber about Amelia Bones jumping through his destroyed window on Christmas Day before stunning him.

Susan was sitting there feeling ten feet tall with pride at her aunt's deeds when Harry leant over and whispered to her. "Sorry for ruining your Christmas, it couldn't have been any fun on your own."

"Oh that's all right Harry. I was with Hannah, and this is what Auntie does. I wouldn't have it any other way."

Amelia now opened the questions up to the chamber, though Shack would still be asking them of the prisoner. Hearing that a couple of people had stumbled on the secret over the years, only for Barty to oblivate them, was a discovery that stripped any last semblance of sympathy away from the man. That he'd kept his son under the

imperius curse for the last decade meant Barty Senior's fate was well and truly sealed. Barty Junior, having been held under an unforgivable curse since stepping out of Azkaban, didn't really have anything to add to the proceedings. As no one really wanted to hear him spout dark lord dogma, he was sentenced as an escaped prisoner from Azkaban. Both he and his father were to have a kiss by a dementor administered before nightfall.

This time it was Susan's turn to lean over and whisper to Harry. "I think I would rather be thrown to a dragon than face a dementor. At least with the dragon, it would be over with quickly!"

As the father and son were being led away to face their sentence, one of the members asked Amelia a question the Head of the DMLE wasn't sure she wanted to answer. With Barchoke and Harry sitting there though, she was trapped into providing one.

"Madam Bones, how did you come by the information that led you to raid the Crouch Residence on Christmas Day?"

"Our friends from the goblin nation provided some quite compelling proof of just what was going on in the Crouch Residence."

Albus was on his feet, knowing that goblins always expected to be paid. "Can I ask just why the goblins were interested in wizarding affairs?"

"Actually, that leads us nicely on to the next part of our proceedings. It has come to the ministry's attention that Barty Crouch was the main force behind a wizard being sent to Azkaban without a trial, we intend to right that wrong here today."

Dumbledore needed all his experience not to let his dismay at this development show, knowing at once exactly who the wizard was Amelia referred to. "On a point of order, I must advise that this emergency session doesn't currently have a mandate to..."

Harry didn't need the spell the director used on the steps of Gringotts, the anger in his voice clearly discernible as it reverberated throughout the chamber. "Point of order? Where was this love of the law when you ordered Hagrid to deny my godfather his rightful possession of me? When you left a baby on a muggle doorstep? When you employed Voldemort to teach at Hogwarts?" Harry

ignored the shouts and gasps at his use of that name. "Where was this love of the law when you attempted to blackmail my new defence tutor?" Harry then addressed a chamber that was agog at these accusations.

"Sirius Black is my godfather, yet this is the same man that supposedly served both me and my parents up to the dark lord? I demand the right to know if this is the truth, who in here would deny me that right?"

Dumbledore was aghast at Harry's knowledge, and the ferocity of his verbal attack. He tried to stall for time. "Harry, this is not something a child needs to hear, Sirius Black is..."

"My name is Centurion Crow, and I am no child old man. If Sirius Black is found to be guilty, I would have no hesitation in demanding satisfaction and killing him myself. Now, as Chief Warlock, aren't you the one charged with seeing justice done, or - like headmaster of Hogwarts - is that just another title you hold but have no intention of fulfilling the job requirements?"

The minister stood at this point and took over. "I personally invited young Harry and his father here today to see justice done. Regardless of his crimes, Sirius Black should still have been afforded a trial. When pureblood wizards can be thrown in Azkaban, with no hearing nor any right of appeal, it begs the question of who could be next."

Cornelius knew he had them now. If this fate could befall one pureblood, what was to stop any of them being the next victim? It was time for the minister to do a bit of grandstanding, especially since he made sure the press would be here. "My ministry were not involved in this injustice, furthermore, it will never play a part in a witch or wizard being sent to Azkaban without a trial. If that is the kind of minister you want, then you got the wrong wizard when you elected Cornelius Fudge. Aurors, bring in the prisoner. The same rules apply as last time, we will allow questions from the chamber once the truth about that evening has been established."

Mad-eye and Tonks led Sirius into the chamber, ensuring he was secured to the supplied chair before administering the veritaserum. Albus was desperate to object on any grounds possible but Alastor Moody's presence robbed him of all the opportunities he could think

of. It would be an incredibly stupid person who brought Mad-eye's honesty into question, especially where supposed dark wizards were concerned.

The chamber expected someone who had spent the last decade in Azkaban to be rather the worse for wear, in that sense Sirius didn't disappoint. What did surprise them was the wide smile and manacled wave of greeting in the boy-who-lived's direction.

Sirius proclaiming under truth serum that he was neither the Potter's secret keeper nor a death eater fairly got the chamber talking, and the press offering thanks to de Sales that they were present here today.

The entire chamber sat enthralled as Sirius was led through his story. Of how he became uneasy that Halloween evening, and that unease turning to panic as he couldn't find Peter. Panic becoming horror as he arrived in Godric's Hollow to discover the closest thing to family he had in the entire world murdered. His world shifting out of kilter when Hagrid refused to hand his godson over, and his need for revenge on the betrayer - eventually leading to him being illegally incarcerated in Azkaban.

The chamber had listened earlier as tragedy saw a wizard, trapped by circumstances, continually break the very laws he once so passionately championed. Now circumstances appeared to have colluded to see this innocent wizard lose a decade of his life, no one knew quite what to say.

Harry though had a question he would like to hear Sirius publicly answer. "Minister, would it be possible to ask my godfather just who cast the fidelius charm on my parents' home?"

Cornelius was not the only person who wondered why Harry was asking that particular question, he was the one who voiced his puzzlement though.

"Simple minister, our research shows that this charm is extremely complicated to cast, and requires a lot of power from the caster. I doubt if there are many in this chamber who could successfully perform the charm."

This appeared to upset a toad faced woman who let her displeasure be known "I would like to know what you're implying by that remark? I would also like to know why this chamber is allowing goblins to interfere in the affairs of wizards, something I'm sure was against wizarding law the last time I looked."

Harry took umbrage at this witch's attitude. "You clearly don't know anything about goblins madam. We never imply, rather ask questions and investigate until we get to the truth. On the Halloween evening of nineteen eighty one, despite being protected by a fidelius charm, my parents were murdered. My godfather was soon placed in Azkaban while my godmother now resides in ward forty nine of St. Mungo's, I ended up being abandoned on a muggle doorstep by Albus Dumbledore."

Cornelius was watching this and thinking how right Amelia was, the boy obviously considered Albus poison - and the minister would have to be careful not to become tainted by association with the Hogwarts headmaster.

"Now you may think that's a lot of hard luck for one person to have, but here's where we hit a problem. My godfather was in Godric's Hollow that night yet clearly denied his rights - by Dumbledore's orders. My godmother was one of the most respected aurors the ministry had at the time, yet again her rights were ignored. Both my godmother and godfather were available to me on that evening, yet Albus Dumbledore took it upon himself to decide what was going to happen to me - and you all stood back and let him."

This was met with utter silence as Harry held them all accountable for what had befallen their saviour. He then turned his attention back on the witch who'd asked him the question in the first place. "We are well aware goblins are not allowed to interfere in the affairs of wizards, but we are allowed - and certainly intend - to investigate fully wizards who commit crimes against goblins. Does anyone here doubt crimes were committed against me? On discovering my godfather was innocent, yet received no trial, we began investigating the people who put him in Azkaban. It was as simple as A, B, C, - Albus, Bagnold and Crouch. It was this same investigation that discovered Crouch's deceit, and allowed my godfather the trial we've just witnessed here today."

Mad-eye then asked Sirius the suggested question, only to be disappointed when he didn't know. "I was more concerned with making sure the rat would be well hidden, I wasn't there when it was cast and never thought to ask."

The witch was back at her snarkiest, her attempt at a sweet innocent voice fooling no one. "I hope that answer satisfies our goblin friends?" She actually managed to make the word 'friends' sound like the worst contagious disease in the world.

"Absolutely not. I am very suspicious of the supposed 'coincidences' that happened around me that night. Just like I'm suspicious of Flamel's stone being hidden in Hogwarts - and Voldemort being employed to teach there the very year Harry Potter was scheduled to arrive. I can also assure the honourable lady we will get the answers we require, and that I applaud Minister Fudge's tough stance against those breaking the law."

Harry sat down at that to mixed reactions. The toad faced witch was fuming, quite a few others appeared concerned at what these goblin investigations might unearth. The minister though wore a wide smile as he continued the proceedings.

"Is there anyone in this chamber who has the slightest doubt Sirius Black is an innocent man?" Cornelius was well aware by asking the question in this way, anyone objecting would have to publicly declare themselves. In a vote, they could have cast their opinion in secret.

"Since there are no objections, I declare Sirius Black a free wizard. Madam Bones will investigate this matter further, including a recommendation for recompense over wrongful incarceration, and report back to this chamber at the first meeting of nineteen ninety two. A warrant shall be immediately issued for the arrest of Peter Pettigrew, his Order of Merlin is of course revoked. I declare this emergency session over and would like to thank everyone for attending during this holiday period."

The manacles were removed from Sirius and he stood as a free wizard for the first time in a decade. He looked toward his godson, who quickly got the nod from his father. Susan giggled at Harry's visible glee, he actually vaulted over the balustrade, separating the spectators from the court, and was soon wrapped in Sirius' arms.

Here was a belated Christmas present for the press corps, a picture of the boy-who-lived hugging an innocent Sirius Black was a sure thing for the front page. It might even rate a special edition all on its own.

Albus had skin that would put Teflon to shame, he really believed none of the allegations that Harry had just made could possibly stick to him. While the rest of the chamber bore witness to a touching reunion, Albus just saw opportunity knocking - an opportunity he intended to exploit at once.

He quickly made his way over to the celebrating pair. "Good to see you free Sirius, I will certainly support any measures you take to regain custody of your godson..."

Sirius was nowhere near his peak physical condition, which was probably just as well. If he had been, the punch that hit Albus Dumbledore would probably have killed the old wizard. Even in such poor shape though, there was ten years of hate and anger behind the blow.

The physical blow was totally unexpected, and caught Albus unawares. He stumbled back a couple of steps before falling on his bum, sitting there with his nose gushing blood.

An enraged Sirius Black was towering over the downed Dumbledore. "You sanctimonious, conniving old bastard - stay the fuck away from my godson or you'll have me to deal with too!"

The flash of the photographer's camera was the spark that finally ignited Albus' temper. Who did this ungrateful whelp think he was shouting at - some stray mongrel cur? The indignity suffered sitting here on the floor was even more painful than the nose he was sure had crunched under that fist. His wand was out and moving before really registering with the Chief Warlock what spell he intended to cast.

The surge of light that followed made the photographer's flash appear like a mere twinkling Christmas Tree bulb, temporarily blinding nearly all of the chamber's occupants. As their vision returned, the sight that greeted them left most of them wondering if the flash had affected their minds too. A golden boy-who-lived was

currently standing over Albus Dumbledore, with a glowing sword point pressed against the older wizard's chest.

"You'll have to excuse my godfather's abruptness. You see, unlike me, he doesn't think the great Albus Dumbledore would actually curse an unarmed man - I know you better."

Albus had no answer, he had no words. The stump of wood he was holding in his hand was also telling him he now had no wand, his brain though refused to process that information. The elder wand could not be destroyed - it just couldn't!

The flash when Harry sliced through Dumbledore's wand was unexpected, as was his sword glowing for a moment. What was familiar though was the feeling of power now running through the blade, it felt similar to his beloved knife. If Harry could cast a spell with his sword, he would see Dumbledore tied up in restraints - like that incarcerous spell Curse-breaker Weasley was teaching them.

No one was more surprised than Harry when thick ropes shot out of the sword of Gryffindor, and secured Dumbledore's arms to his torso - he certainly hid his surprise better though.

Mad-eye had seen the lad prepare to take action and was moving until that flash sent a pain right through his skull, his magical eye not reacting fast enough to the sudden tremendous increase in light levels. As both his eyes recovered, Alastor discovered he couldn't move. Well, not without taking a goblin blade through his right kidney.

"Take it easy my warrior friend, both of us have seen more than enough bloodshed. Let us carefully weigh up our options, before allowing another precious drop to be unnecessarily spilled."

This was said so quietly that only the two of them could hear it. "What are you proposing sir?"

"My son will not harm anyone who doesn't attack him first, let us see how this plays out and then shake hands - warrior to warrior?"

Mad-eye was unsure about this. "You've got the drop on me, why would you give up that advantage?"



"Neither of us are fools, we wouldn't have lived this long if we were. I also think you are a man of honour, though if I'm wrong I'm positive my son will avenge me."

The grizzled old auror was left questioning both his eyes as the lad cast a spell, wordlessly and with a sword, wrapping Dumbledore up like yesterday's leftover turkey. As Harry turned to talk to Black, Mad-eye slowly raised his empty hand. "That's quite the boy you've got there, no one gets that good without a massive amount of training."

Barchoke's blade had disappeared as he shook the auror's hand. "My son is a dedicated warrior, his appointment to centurion status was earned entirely on merit."

Moody kept his ear to the ground and had heard of this lad's feat of taking down a fully grown mountain troll, there were also whispers circulating regarding his encounter with Lucius Malfoy. Alastor was honest enough with himself to admit he'd taken both stories with a pinch of salt - not anymore. The lad's movements had been fluid and lightning quick, he could have sliced Albus open if the lad wanted to. Yes he was undoubtedly young but clearly carried himself with a maturity that was way beyond his years. With Bones influencing that idiot Fudge and this lad on board for the fight - not forgetting that sneaky goblin father of his - Moody felt better about their chances than he had in years. Shit, he was almost optimistic!

His glance at Albus filled him with regret. The old wizard's time was over, he just didn't know it yet. Albus Dumbledore's policy of blanket forgiveness really stuck in the ancient auror's craw. Burying your people while letting the murderers walk free was no way to win a war, and Alastor had always known their war wasn't over.

Sirius made his way over, with his arm on his godson's shoulders. A godson who'd sheathed his sword and lost the golden armour. The now free wizard had known at once what Dumbledore was attempting, and had enjoyed slamming that door, and his fist, firmly in Dumbledore's face. He now intended to publicly end any speculation on the matter. The knowledge that Harry and his adopted father already had it covered just added spice to the mix, it was great to be free and be a marauder again.

"Barchoke, I would like to thank you for the wonderful job you have done in raising my godson, I would also like to say publicly that I have no intention of disputing your position as his parent and guardian. I do hope you will allow me to play some part in his life though?"

The goblin bowed to the ragged figure before throwing something else into the mix. "Lord Black, our door will always be open to you. There are things I am ill equipped to teach my son, I'm sure he would rather learn them from his godfather than some tutor I hired."

Amelia and Susan joined the conversation at that point. "Not if all his tutors are like the one you arranged to teach history at Hogwarts - Miss Hobson. I understand the young professor has made quite the impact since arriving at the castle? Harry, I was really impressed by your armour, I've never seen anything like that before."

Susan spoke before realising what she was saying. "I now see what you mean about your tunic adapting..." The red faced young witch was then left to explain her comments to a group of smirking adults. "Harry showed us his armour in Miss Hobson's class, he had to loosen his shirt or it would have been ruined."

This was like manna from heaven for Sirius, discovering that his godson's life wasn't all training fairly put the twinkle back in his eye - as did noticing how this young witch was eyeing up his godson. "Let me see if I've got this right, you got your shirt off in front of a hot young teacher and all the girls in your class? Your dad would be so proud of you, while your mum would probably give you a clip round your ear."

"Sorry to disappoint you, Sirius but I kept my shirt on. I did offer to duel while in full armour but the bell beat us, I have improved my speed since then."

It was Amelia who came back for more. "I was wondering if that armour was commercially available? It makes a dragon hide vest appear pretty lame in comparison."

Harry was well used to dealing with inquiries like this from his friends. He understood there was no insult intended, although Madam Bones had practically stumbled into one. "Centurion armour is exactly that, ma'am, armour for centurions. It can never be bought or

handed on to someone else, but must always be earned. For someone not of centurion rank to wear this armour would be an instant death penalty - much like you have set penalties for witches and wizards who use unforgivables. I understand your interest Madam Bones, but centurion armour is sacred to our nation."

"My son is quite correct Madam Bones, though slightly modest. I don't believe the ministry has similar positions to that of a centurion, it's almost like a cross between a warrior and an ambassador. In any war, you will always find centurions at the front of our nation's warriors. In times of peace, leading by example and promoting goblin values is one of their main roles in life."

Sirius still had his arm on Harry's shoulders and could feel his godson stand that little bit straighter at his father's words of praise. "Well I have to say this is bad planning on your part, Harry. If you'd gotten me out a couple of days sooner, there would have been an extra Christmas present for you yesterday."

Barchoke could see the twinkle in this wizard's eye and thought this was the kind of person his son needed to be around more, Harry needed to learn to relax a little. "Since he's spending Christmas with two girls, Sirius, I don't think he would have missed a present from his godfather too much. Speaking of those girls, I'd better get him back there. Hermione and Padma are sure to be waiting, dying to know every detail." He chuckled to himself watching Harry now squirm under his godfather's gentle teasing. "Sirius, with Harry spending the holiday at the Grangers, you are more than welcome to stay with me. I would also prefer if our healers could have a look at you. If nothing else, they have excellent nutrient potions you could certainly benefit from."

Sirius readily agreed to that suggestion, anything would be preferable to Grimmauld Place. He didn't know it was possible to feel elated and exhausted at the same time, today had already taken a lot out of him.

As the trio were making their way out the chamber, an idea hit Harry. "Sirius, how would you like to give your godson the best present ever?"

This intrigued both adults until Harry very quietly explained what he wanted. Sirius' loud roar of laughter was the first to pass his lips in over a decade.

Dumbledore sat and watched as the goblin effortlessly accomplished what he could not. Black left in their company, clearly more than happy to go along with them. Calling Sirius Lord Black would also halt any other attempts to remove Harry from Gringotts, a pureblood lord in their corner just legitimised Barchoke's claim on the boy.

He'd been released while a healer had repaired his nose and cleaned away the blood. Albus was beginning to wonder if the stain on his reputation would last a lot longer. He'd known about those deadly blades of Harry's, yet made the same mistake again of letting the boy get too close - and paid a very high price.

He didn't even want to think how a picture of a golden armoured / snow-white tunic wearing boy-who-lived standing over him with a sword would look. All Albus' thoughts were centred on the two pieces of wood that were now just that - two pieces of wood. The elder wand had been his ace up his sleeve when facing Voldemort, now their entire world was resting on the boy being able to take down the darkest wizard in centuries.

Albus was glad there was still most of the holidays yet to go, he reckoned it would take him longer than that to figure out where he went from here.

In stark contrast, Cornelius was prancing about like a peacock. The ploy of being open and telling the truth had drawn public praise from the boy-who-lived, now there was a Christmas present gold couldn't buy.

-oOoOo-

With Harry gone, Emma shooed Dan away to watch some sport on the telly so she could spend time with the girls. It was heartening to see Hermione and Padma so close, their daughter never had a close friend before meeting Harry. They both obviously missed him but Emma was beginning to understand the dynamic in the group, especially as Padma told a few tales from Hogwarts.

Both Hermione and Harry were pretty serious kids, Padma seemed determined to lighten the pair of them up a bit. Hermione had been teased before of course, but not like this. There was nothing malicious about Padma's teasing, it was more gentle barbs in an attempt to get her friends to blush. Hearing that Hermione was now teasing back was practically a relief for Emma, her 'spending the night with Harry' jibe had her laughing out loud.

Padma's story of how some of the witches had turned their attention onto Neville, and how they dealt with it, had Emma laughing once more. It did raise some concerns with the mother though.

"I just don't understand what all the rush is to find a boyfriend? Kids who are not even into their teens shouldn't be worrying about potential husbands."

While Hermione agreed with her mum, she tried to explain what Padma had told her in a way that might make sense. "Mum, you and dad met at university when you were studying dentistry. How many universities in Britain offer that course?"

"Oh, at least a dozen. Why?"

"In magical Britain, there are no universities. No primary schools, just Hogwarts - nothing else. Apart from a few who might be home-schooled, the students that we meet there are the total population of witches and wizards our age."

Emma now had a new concern. "No further education? Where do the doctors, lawyers and the hundreds of other people you need come from?"

"When you decide on a career, it's almost like an apprenticeship program. You learn the basics for OWL's, then you have NEWT's to qualify for whatever career apprenticeship you want. St. Mungo's trains its own healers, the Ministry of Magic has a wide variety of jobs and there's always private firms too. Even Gringotts employs and trains a few witches and wizards."

Emma was starting to get some idea of just how rare it was to have a witch in the family. She now understood that Hermione's year group had been conceived and born during a war, a war the Grangers were thankfully unaware of at the time, thus resulting in

their smaller than usual number of students. That there was only one magical school for the entire country was mind-blowing. One hospital, one government building, one centre of commerce and only one magical village. With families living practically in isolation, was it any wonder they went a tad 'mental' when they all got together at school. It still sounded a bit like a cattle market to the mother but she was learning from her daughter not to voice those thoughts.

"What do you think of this, Padma?"

She took a moment to ponder before answering her friend's mother. "I think being friends with Harry has had a big influence on all of us. We know he has a big decision to make before he turns seventeen, I know the way he's handling it has certainly had an effect on me. Harry's determined to see what different cultures have to offer before even considering making a decision, that's not something I had thought possible before. There's an entire world out there I know nothing about, and I'm in Ravenclaw because I love to learn. Maybe in a few years I'll start worrying about finding a potential husband, before my father finds one for me, but I intend to enjoy myself with my friends until then."

"Would your father really do that?" Emma realised that was a stupid question straight after she asked it, her father had already tried to arrange a marriage for both twins to Harry.

"If there isn't a wizard my father approves of at least dating me by the time I'm seventeen, then he will take the matter out of my hands. That's assuming he hasn't already offered me to someone else?"

That this was totally alien to the Grangers went without saying, Hermione had already stated though that she had no intention of losing her friendship with Padma over the matter. "Mum, I've noticed in the magical world that couples seem to marry younger than non magicals probably would. Harry's parents married right after graduating Hogwarts, so did Neville's."

"My father was almost thirty when his parents arranged a marriage contract with my mother's family, she was seventeen."

Padma's casual acceptance of the situation was something both Granger girls were really struggling to deal with.

Harry's arrival soon had the girls racing to meet him, desperate to find out how the trial had gone. His detailed and lengthy explanation had the rest of them waiting on tomorrow's Prophet being delivered.

-oOoOo-

Amelia was sitting with her niece, enjoying a lazy breakfast and smirking at the Prophet. The theme their two front page pictures appeared to have in common, apart from Harry being in them, was that both would have been considered unbelievable less than twenty four hours before. It was hard to decide whether the boy-who-lived hugging Sirius Black was more shocking than a golden Harry holding his sword on a bleeding Albus Dumbledore.

The newspaper then went to great lengths to explain the 'history' behind each picture, accurately and honestly reporting exactly what had been said in the courtroom. Amelia wondered if this new standard of journalism was as a result over goblin complaints about their catastrophe in the cemetery story, or simply that yesterday's events didn't require any sensationalising. The actual facts of the matter were easily sensational enough on their own.

Amelia was about to discover that, as far as her niece was concerned, the answer was neither. The white owl that flew to Susan was easily considered more sensational news by the young witch than anything the Prophet had to say.

"That's Harry's owl, Eargit." Her hands were trembling as Susan removed the note from the gorgeous owl's leg. Her eyes nearly popped out her head and she was almost hyperventilating as Susan explained the note. "Harry was sorry I didn't get to spend Christmas Day with my family, he blamed himself for you having to work. Harry's offering to make it up to me with a muggle shopping trip, with Hermione, her mum, the Patil twins - and Hannah's invited too! Can I go?"

Just looking at how excited her niece was over this opportunity meant there was no way Amelia could say no. Susan squealed before diving for the floo, only to come rushing back to speak to the owl. "I'm just going to check if my friend can come too, I'll be back in a minute and then could you take my answer back to Harry?"

Amelia smiled as her niece shot back out the room to contact Hannah, Mrs Granger was certainly going to have her hands full - taking five young witches shopping.

-oOoOo-

The Burrow may have been full to capacity but it was unusually quiet, that was a situation that could never last for long. The Daily Prophet was laid flat on the table as the entire family crowded around, all trying to read it at the same time. In the hubbub created by nine Weasleys all then attempting to get their opinion across at the same time, no one noticed the rat slipping out of Ron's pocket.

-oOoOo-

The Prophet was also being devoured, along with breakfast, at the Granger household. Both activities were disrupted by the arrival of a Gringotts owl, the majestic bird flew straight to Harry. His reaction on reading the note was even more extreme than the young witch who received a letter from him. Harry was on his feet, jumping up and down while punching the air in loud celebration.

Not even Hermione had seen him this demonstrative before, "Good news, Harry?"

"The best, Hermione, simply the best." Harry had to take a couple of deep breaths to calm down slightly before he could give his best friend a proper answer. "Remember I told you Sirius inherited a house from his family, and wanted us to spend some time there? His family were rather dark so my father offered Gringotts services to sweep the house for any dark items. I can't quite believe it but they found another item tainted like the diadem, that taint has also been dealt with."

"That's good, but I don't remember you being this excited when we found Ravenclaw's Diadem?"

"Oh, that's not why I'm so happy. Sirius was apologising for the lack of birthday or Christmas presents while I was growing up, I gave him a suggestion of how to make up for it. He's giving me the best present I could wish for."



Everyone now wanted to know just what that present was, Harry didn't keep them waiting. "My godfather can do something for me my father can't, Lord Black can officially refuse all the betrothal contracts on his godson's behalf. Sirius is going to wait until after the holidays to send out the letters, just in case Padma's father decides she should then have to go home."

This news was met with four blank faces, leaving Harry to wonder if he'd done something wrong. "Eh, is that okay?"

Padma and Hermione sprang out their chairs and were soon cuddling a relieved Harry, leaving Dan to chuckle, "I think that means it's okay, Harry."

A/N thanks for reading.

## Chapter 22

The group portkeyed into Gringotts where Barchoke warmly greeted them. They were also welcomed by a bathed, barbered and certainly more becoming Lord Sirius Orion Black.

"It's a pleasure to meet you all, especially Harry's friends." It was difficult not to tease his godson, since he was standing there holding a witch's hand, but Sirius managed to resist. He'd spent hours chatting with Barchoke about their favourite subject and had quickly discovered how close Harry was to a certain Miss Granger. Sirius was desperate to discover more about his godson.

"I understand you all have plans for today but was wondering if we could have dinner together tonight? I've hired a private room from Tom in the Leaky Cauldron and we could spend an hour or two getting to know one another this evening?"

Dan and Emma thought this was a brilliant idea, with the three kids all showing great enthusiasm for the plan too, it was quickly confirmed as a date.

He then addressed his godson. "I know you're meeting more of your friends today, Harry, please invite any of them along that want to come too. The more the merrier has always been one of my mottos."

Barchoke then handed Emma an envelope thick with cash. "Harry wanted the shopping trip to be on him. I know you already bought my son practically a new wardrobe, and both of us are really grateful for that. Today though, we'd like it to be our treat."

Emma was left with no other option but to graciously accept before they headed off to the Leaky Cauldron, where the rest of their friends would be joining them.

Neville and his gran, the formidable Lady Longbottom - resplendent with her signature stuffed vulture hat, were already in the pub. That their friend didn't rush straight over to greet them alerted the other three there was something else going on here.

His gran marched over and bowed to Harry. "Centurion Crow, the house of Longbottom would like to thank you, your father and the goblin nation for righting a great wrong. Our house is in your debt..."

Harry understood it wasn't polite to interrupt someone in a situation like this, but he felt compelled to do so. "Madam Longbottom, please don't. I told Neville back in September he was the nearest thing to family I have, there can be no talk of debts between us. That was also my godmother the death eater attacked, goblins look after family Madam Longbottom. My friends and family call me Harry, I would be honoured if you would do the same."

There was a hint of moisture in the proud old witch's eyes as she stared at the young man in front of her. "Thank you, Harry. I can see Neville has made some good friends in his short time at Hogwarts."

"My godfather has invited us all to dinner here tonight, we would certainly be delighted if you and Neville could join us?"

One glance at her grandson was all she needed to know this was something he really wanted her to say yes to. Neville had been missing his friends so Augusta quickly agreed. This seemed to be the cue that Neville had been waiting for, he dashed from behind his grandmother to greet his friends.

Ramrao Patil exited the floo to see one of his twin daughters in the company of potentially, two of the most powerful young wizards in Britain. That his other daughter, still wearing her gift from Harry, was also joining the group for today pleased him greatly.

Hearing that they were invited to meet Lord Black for dinner tonight was a golden opportunity that couldn't be turned down, he and Smita would certainly be taking up that offer.

Discovering mere minutes later that Madam Bones and her two charges would also be joining them had Ramrao's head in a spin. Since their move to Britain, the Patils had constantly faced hostility from the country's pureblood elite. They guarded their 'patch' jealously, and it had been made very plain that he and his beautiful wife were not wanted.

Their twins were like both half's of his beloved wife. Smita was as serious as Padma or as flighty as Parvati, depending on her mood and the circumstances. That they didn't get invited to parties and balls because they weren't 'British' was just another form of bigotry

as far as the Patils were concerned. That his wife loved parties and dancing was the only reason that their snubs bothered him.

Every day, Ramrao woke and thanked both their families for bringing Smita into his life, he loved his wife more than life itself. He also loved his daughters, and that was the main reason he had offered the betrothal contract to Harry Potter. The wife of Lord Potter could be of any descent or blood purity, the Lady Potter would demand respect.

That both his girls now owed this young man a life debt was something that he might bring up later at dinner, but not before talking it over with Smita first. He may be the voice of the Patil family but only a fool didn't listen to good advice, and his wife always gave good advice.

That Padma's friendship with these people saw the Patil family invited to dinner amongst this exulted company was not lost on her father either. That his daughter was clearly very happy was also something he wanted to encourage. He wished everyone well before heading home to talk over these developments with his wife. That there would also be muggles, and perhaps even goblins at this dinner too bothered the head of the Patil family not a jot.

-oOoOo-

Outside the pub, the group split along gender lines. Dan was taking both boys to his club for a few hours while Emma loaded the girls into a Harrods bound taxi. Emma decided it would be better containing the young witches to the one store. In London, that meant Harrods. They could easily spend the day there, with the men folk meeting them later for lunch.

The instant the group entered the store, Padma had to take her twin aside and try to talk her down. Parvati was so excited, there was a real danger of her releasing accidental magic.

"...but Padma look, just look..."

"I see it Pav, but you need to calm down and then we can both enjoy it. We've got hours to shop before meeting the boys for lunch. Then more shopping before heading back and having dinner with everyone."

It was really comical to watch her sister's eyes almost bulge out her head. "You mean we can actually buy some of this stuff? Padma, I don't have any of their money?"

This drew a smile from her twin. "I do, and Harry's father gave a pile to Emma for our shopping too. I was going to get some perfume for mum, and maybe slippers for father? Will you help me chose?"

This was exactly the right thing to say, Parvati had Padma by the arm and was dragging her deeper into this Alladin's cave of treasures.

Hannah and Susan's jaws were practically on the floor too, drawing a giggle from Hermione. "Probably just as well Parvati doesn't know this is only one floor of the store."

It was Susan who recovered first. "You mean there's more?"

"There are seven floors. Mum, we're going to head up to the fashion section. Will you keep your eye on the twins?"

Hannah was also recovering from the shock. "Mrs Granger, just mention fashion section to Parvati, she'll be along to join us in a flash."

Hermione led both girls over to the escalator, drawing another comment from Hannah. "Now this is what I call a moving staircase, why can't we have these kind at Hogwarts?"

"Hey, you should give being in Ravenclaw a try. We've to climb up to the top of that tower umpteen times every day." Hermione led them unerringly to the right department, and watched their chins hit the floor again.

"Harry's father gave my mum cash to pay for this today. So, anything you see you like, just sing out."

This was way too much for Susan. "What if you like it all?"

Hermione's giggles once more rang out. "Let's go and have a look at some tops, unless you want to check out the lingerie section before the boys get here..."

-oOoOo-

Dan led Harry and Neville into the child-friendly diner on Harrods fourth floor, only to be mobbed. Well, only for Harry to be mobbed by three exceedingly happy young witches. Parvati had her arms wrapped around Harry and kissed him on the cheek, before passing the bewildered boy onto the redhead. "Thank you, Harry, thank you. This place is simply amazing!"

Neville was chuckling at his friend's discomfort, that was before a hyper-excited Parvati gave him the same treatment. "What was that for? I didn't do anything..."

"I didn't want you feeling left out."

Following that same logic, Susan and Hannah hugged and kissed Neville too - after Harry though.

Emma slid out the booth to the table next to it where Dan joined her. Harry was soon sitting between Hermione and Padma, while Neville found himself squashed into the other bench seat between Parvati and Susan. Both were sitting very close, using the excuse they needed to squeeze up so Hannah could fit on the seat too.

Hermione asked Harry how he got on at her father's club, his frown signalled not too well. "It was okay. We spent ages learning safety protocols, then had to wear earmuffs and special glasses - all to put a few holes in a piece of paper. I was kinda expecting more...if that makes sense?"

Hermione realised that, after some of the spells they had been learning from Professor Weasley, shooting paper targets would seem a tad tame. "I'll ask dad to give you a demonstration of just what guns are capable of before we head back to Hogwarts. It's not just paper targets you can put holes in - and from a far greater distance than you can cast a spell."

Harry left that for now, keen to discover how their morning had gone. He'd loaned Hermione his bag, and that was the only reason they weren't currently drowning in shopping. He'd actually thought about getting Hermione a bag of her own for Christmas, he liked carrying her books though so scraped that idea.

Emma ordered a range of starters, burgers and shakes all round. Both parents couldn't contain their smiles at the sight of their daughter sitting eating lunch amongst her friends as they all caught up with each other. That they were witches and wizards didn't matter to the two dentists, that they were Hermione's friends was all that counted. Neither would admit that they had practically given up on this ever happening for their daughter.

-oOoOo-

It was a blessing Sirius had hired a private room, the youngsters hit the Leaky Cauldron like a tsunami - their excitement and exuberance sweeping everything in their path. It was a knackered and somewhat relieved Emma and Dan who trailed on behind them. Of the seven kids they'd been in charge of, four of them had never set foot in a muggle shop before - with Harry and Padma fairing only slightly better on the experience scale. The Granger parents felt a bit like a sheepdog must at the end of a hard day working in the hills, ready for their dinner and then curling up to sleep.

Seeing everyone else was already in the room, Emma attempted to apologise. "Sorry for being late everybody, the store was still open and we practically had to drag this lot out." It was said with a smile as all the guests could see their charges had really enjoyed themselves.

Amelia Bones headed straight to Emma and offered her a chair. "You have the look of someone who could use a drink before dinner, what would you like?"

"Oh a glass of red wine would be lovely right about now..."

The words had hardly left Emma's mouth when her requested drink appeared on the table right in front of her. While she was contemplating how that happened, Amelia had more to say.

"I want to thank you for what you did for the kids today, it's easy to see they all enjoyed it. I don't know how you managed to keep an eye on them all day?"

"It was easy, Auntie, we were only in one store. Providing we didn't leave it, and trust me we didn't want to leave it, we could look about at all this amazing stuff."

The information Susan had missed telling was supplied by Hannah. "This one store was bigger than all of Diagon Alley put together! It was seven stories high and sold everything from entire kitchens to pairs of knickers - I've never seen a shop sell a complete room before."

At this, Emma had to intercede. "The girls did hit the lingerie section, I tried to ensure their purchases were all age appropriate but don't know if things differ in your society. You might want to check what they bought first?"

A stunningly beautiful Indian woman, wearing a gorgeous pastel green sari, was now beside them. If there was even the slightest doubt of her identity, this was dispelled when Emma spotted the gift in her hand that she'd seen Padma and Parvati pick for their mother.

"Hello Mrs Granger, I'm Smita Patil and I would like to thank you for what you've done for my girls. I know Parvati likes to push the boundaries so I will be checking her purchases, please don't think this in any way reflects on you. Padma can't speak highly enough of both you and your husband, and I really am so grateful for the opportunities you've given her and Parvati."

Emma was up and shaking her hand in greeting before they were then joined by Augusta. With Hermione currently unloading and distributing the day's shopping amongst their charges, the four ladies were taking this chance to chat before dinner.

Ramrao had been chatting with Lord Black and Barchoke, that was until the main party arrived. Sirius instantly made a beeline for Dan Granger. The twin's father then heard the impossible, a goblin chuckling with laughter.

"You'll have to excuse Lord Black, he's not quite himself yet. Since gaining his freedom, he's been beside me at every spare moment - desperate to find out more about his godson. This is the second time Harry has stayed at the Grangers and he really couldn't wait to talk to Dan about it. Both Hermione's parents are fond of my son, that



makes them people Sirius absolutely wants to get to know. I'll need to see Hermione about adding him to their wards."

Recognising that no snub was intended, Ramrao asked a question that had troubled him. "I wondered about those wards when Padma told us we would have to contact her through Gringotts. Can you ward a muggle house?"

"The director made Hermione a friend of our nation. That, and my son staying there, allows the building to be warded. As you will appreciate, Dan and Emma would be helpless against even something as simple as malicious mail. Normally this would not be a problem, but this is not a normal situation. Hermione's friendship with my son is now known nationally, my son also has enemies from the last war that the ministry didn't deal with. Neither of us were prepared to take the chance that those enemies might go after a soft target."

This was a development Ramrao had not thought of. As he watched his wife standing chatting with the other women, and his girls gathered with their friends, it was almost as if the goblin read his mind.

"Padma and Neville may not have appeared at his side in the Prophet, but you can bet the wrong people will know how close they both are to my son. Longbottom Manor sits behind strong and ancient wards, but I am unaware of what level of protection you have on your home?"

"I really never thought about this, and our home just has a very basic set of wards around it. If my family is in danger then it's not a matter of cost, more important to me is how quickly a secure set of wards can be arranged?"

"As I said to Dan and Emma, this is more of a precautionary measure. If Harry were to stay at your house..."

"My daughter's friends are welcome to stay anytime."

This was all Barchoke needed to hear. "Let's go and have a quick word with Dan and Sirius..."

There was something about Dan Granger that Sirius instantly liked, apart from the fact he was looking after Harry. There seemed to be an ease about the man, an ease that disguised a steely centre. As an auror, you needed to know your partner would stand by you and have your back when trouble called. Sirius was getting the impression here was a man you could count on.

That he was also giving the marauder teasing material to use on his godson was another big plus in Dan's favour. Sirius had heard from Barchoke that Harry had been pretty broken up when discovering he was innocent, yet still had to stay in Azkaban. Hearing that his godson spent the night cuddling into Hermione for comfort was ammunition that was begging to be used. That the girl in question was also this man's daughter granted Harry a stay of execution - for now.

Barchoke and Ramrao's arrival saw the goblin's proposal quickly agreed upon, though that wasn't quite correct. Ramrao did object, until Dan's laughter stopped him.

"Good luck with your argument. Emma and I tried the same, and lost - the argument that is. I certainly sleep sounder with the knowledge my family is safe behind these wards."

This ended the argument and arrangements were made, though both married men inserted the proviso that they would need to speak with their wives first.

The kids finally had their shopping sorted into piles of those famous green bags, the size of those piles surprised even Emma. "I suppose that is the only downside to a magical bag, you don't realise just how much you've bought."

It was a flabbergasted Amelia who summed up the other parents' mood. "I can't allow you to pay for all that, please let me at least make a contribution?"

"Amelia, the only thing Dan and I paid for today was lunch. Harry wanted the day to be on him, and his father gave me the cash. I still have some left to hand back, I just needed a seat first."

Barchoke waived her attempt to return anything away. "Please pass anything left to the three of them, they can spend it over the rest of the holiday."

This was a golden opportunity for Sirius to solve another of Harry's problems, he didn't hesitate. Living up to his 'more the merrier' motto, the marauder waded right in. "Speaking of holidays, as Harry's godfather we can now access the Potter properties. His father and I are planning on seeing Harry spend most of the coming summer exploring some of these, with the Grangers of course. I would like to invite you along for part or all of the holiday period."

The large smile on Harry's face was all that Sirius was focusing on, he didn't notice anything else. "Harry, Hermione and Padma are currently working on a summer itinerary. Once that's settled, we can then sort out details of who's interested and when."

It was an even more excited bunch who sat down to dinner, all the younger members clearly wanting to spend some of the summer together.

Sirius was sitting across from Harry. Watching his godson be happy with his friends was helping Sirius' recovery almost as much as those wonderful goblin potions. It also wasn't hard to spot the 'hierarchy' within his group of friends. Harry clearly thought Hermione was in a class of her own, and treated her as such. Barchoke had said they were inseparable, Sirius now got to see this phenomenon first hand. Padma and Neville obviously came next. Again his information gleaned from Harry's father was that they had been friends since their first week of Hogwarts, and only gotten closer since.

The marauder reckoned their friendship with Padma must be really important to them, he could see no other reason for Parvati being there. Perhaps being in this company might eventually round off some of her more annoying habits, like emitting nerve-jangling squeals of joy at the smallest thing.

Sirius was sitting next to the girl's father, a man who clearly had something on his mind. "If you don't ask Ramrao, I won't know what answers you're looking for."

"Forgive me Lord Black, I realise this is not something one brings up at the dinner table. I was wondering if there were any other duties you were taking over concerning House Potter?"

"Ah, I see. Ramrao, I will give you the information you're looking for, if you can promise it won't leave House Patil. That promise will apply until I get around to dealing with the entire matter - probably about the end of January should do it."

Receiving a quick agreement, Sirius told the concerned father the truth. "My godson has been raised as a goblin and, while I would much rather not have spent the last decade in Azkaban, I have absolutely no problem with Harry's upbringing or his father. Goblins don't use betrothal contracts, believing their children should choose their own spouses. Harry has asked me to give a negative reply to every betrothal contract with his name on it. As his godfather, I aim to respect his wishes."

It wasn't hard to see the disappointment in the father's face, Sirius attempted to make up for it. "I found that the friendships I made at Hogwarts were the strongest of my life so far, and a blind man could see those four are close. I have no way of knowing what will happen as the years go by, I just know it won't include a betrothal contract."

This actually did cheer Ramrao up. A blanket refusal meant his girls were being treated exactly the same as every other witch, and Padma was clearly close to these two boys. It was strange to see the quieter of their girls being the one who was the centre of attention, something Parvati was clearly struggling with. He was sure Smita would have picked up on this, and would be having a chat with her when they got home tonight.

Sirius though wanted there to be no misunderstanding of his role in Harry's life. "Ramrao, I'm Harry's godfather but it will be to his father he will look for advice first, and that's the way it should be. I'm trying to build a role for myself here, the best that I can hope for is a favourite uncle - something along those lines. My role will be to assist Barchoke and Harry in any way I can. This is Harry's decision, backed by his father and carried out by me."

"Thank you for explaining that to me Lord Black, it also helps explain something I have been struggling with. Your godson saved both my daughters' lives, yet refused to acknowledge a life debt. Padma

explained that goblins always help their friends and family, therefore there could be no debt. I am finally beginning to get my head around this extraordinary young...goblin?"

Sirius let out a sigh. "If you've done that, then you're way ahead of me. It seems no time at all from when I was berating James' attempts to change Harry's nappy. I went from that to the young person we see before us. It's not the time locked in Azkaban I mind so much, more the years it cost me with my godson."

Dan was sitting on Sirius' other side, and had heard every word. "Why don't you come and stay with us over the New Year? It would give you time with Harry, and allow us all to get to know one another better. Since moving all our banking to Gringotts, we can now afford to take a longer holiday at the summer." Dan glanced knowingly across the table. "I think we're going to be seeing a lot of each other over the coming years."

Sirius was overcome at the kindness he was being shown here, and since being set free. That this kindness was not related to him being the new Lord Black, rather because he was Harry's godfather, just made this kindness that little bit more special in the marauder's eyes. He nodded acceptance before his voice would work again, "I'd like that Dan, I'd like that very much."

The dinner guests had graduated into three groups. The seven kids were easily the largest, and the loudest. The ladies all formed another group, the occasional bout of laughter informing the room that they were having a good time. The menfolk stood back, surveying the room while chatting about Sirius' day in court. Both Dan and Ramrao were desperate to hear every detail from Barchoke and Sirius, those Prophet pictures were iconic. It was almost ten before goodbyes were said and everyone headed home.

-oOoOo-

Getting ready for bed, Dan could see something was troubling his wife. Like husbands the world over, Dan hoped it wasn't anything he had said or done. "What's the matter love. Are you angry at me arranging Hermione and Harry to stay a night at Padma's, or asking Sirius to stay here?"

"What? No, why should I be? That will allow the Patils' house to be warded like ours, and Sirius is clearly desperate to get to know Harry better. It was just meeting Simta Patil..."

"Why? What's wrong with her?"

"That's my problem, absolutely nothing. I was all set to dislike a woman who could allow her daughters to be traded away, only to discover I couldn't find anything to dislike. She is a charming, witty witch who loves her husband and adores their girls - that shouldn't be possible! Her parents chose Ramrao as her husband, yet they're as happily married as we are. I don't know how Hermione copes with this every day, it's just so different..."

"I know what you mean love, I enjoyed Ramrao's company too. I noticed he was studying Harry and Neville but, as the father of two girls both boys are friendly with, who can blame him? I overheard a discussion where Sirius told him Harry will be rejecting all those betrothal contracts. I must say, Ramrao seemed to take it well."

This led to Emma shaking her head. "Discussing the possible marriage of your eleven year old daughters is not a conversation you expect to hear at dinner - or ever."

He tried to cheer his wife up with some gentle teasing. "So you don't want me to start negotiating with Barchoke and Sirius to get Hermione betrothed to Harry?"

"Ha-ha. That might actually be funny, if I didn't think our daughter would suddenly change her mind about betrothals - and can you see Harry turning her down?"

Dan achieved his aim of cheering his wife up, the fact she was now laughing at his pained and panicked expression was an entirely different matter.

-oOoOo-

Hermione was having her best holiday ever. She'd never had friends before, never mind have them stay over. Sirius' arrival had also brought a lot of laughter to the Granger household, the man was a bigger kid than his godson!

That same godson was currently holding her hand as she showed both Harry and Padma around Crawley. This was something else she would normally avoid like the plague, going into Crawley without her parents. She had put those dark days behind her though and was enjoying showing the local sights to her friends. It was now time for Harry and Padma's first trip to the cinema, Hermione thought they would both get a kick out of The Addams Family.

As they waited in the queue, the hated voice that Hermione hadn't heard for six months was like a hard kick to the gut. She should have known things had been going too well.

"Oh look, Granger's parents must have gone to rent-a-friend for her Christmas. A Paki and a poofster, I suppose that's all you're worth."

The despised chorus of derogatory laughter that followed these 'witty' insults triggered an automatic response from Hermione, sending the young witch straight into her shell. That was until Hermione felt Harry squeeze her hand, and remembered she was no longer that lonely and scared little girl.

"Who's the comedian Hermione? Clearly not someone who knows you very well."

This stopped the laughter of the five boys who had approached them, though one had a comment to make. "Oh look Big D, it can talk - and I didn't see Granger pull the string at his back."

Harry had never seen the acne cursed boy before, but recognised the type. In any gang, there was always one who would instigate trouble, usually while standing safely behind others.

The sarcasm was fairly dripping off Padma's answer, not intimidated in the slightest by the odds they were facing here. She wasn't about to take that particularly hated insult from anyone. "Oh Hermione, why don't you introduce us to the local wildlife? Do they actually have names, or just numbers on their collars?"

Hermione was drawing courage from having her friends beside her, she was finished giving in to bullies. "Padma, Harry, meet Dudley Dursley and his 'friends'. I used to go to school with them, and they make Ron Weasley seem intelligent."

"Well, coming up with the nick-name 'big-d' must have taken a lot of effort. He also looks as if he eats as much as Weasley too."

Hermione was delighted by the support Padma was giving. Something about this though had made Harry stiffen beside her, Hermione looked at her best friend to see his eyes boring into Dudley. She'd seen that look before, it was usually followed by his knife being drawn as he got ready for battle.

While the group of boys were figuring out if these bitches had just dared to insult them, Harry asked a question. "Dursley, your parents wouldn't happen to be called Vernon and Petunia, would they?"

"Hey big-D, you're fame has spread. The pretty boy has heard of you."

This generated some laughter but just increased the intensity of Harry's stare. There couldn't be too many Vernon and Petunia Dursleys, with a son about the same age as him. He asked one more question to be certain.

"Did your family use to live in Little Whining?"

"Oh shit big-D, you've got your own stalker!"

The putz with the plooks seized any opportunity to escalate the argument. "Yeah, just a pity your stalker's gay. Shit, his hair's longer than my sister's."

Harry had never mentioned his 'family' by name, but his questioning was just a little too specific for the Dursleys to be anything other than his hated aunt and uncle. Hermione also knew the Dursleys, and had no problem believing they would do that to a baby. Dudley Dursley had been the bane of her pre-Hogwarts life, yet his parents refused point blank to see their son as anything but a perfect little gentleman. Neither little nor gentleman were words that could really be associated with the obese bully.

At this particular time, Hermione couldn't give two hoots for Dudley and his gang. She was far more worried at how her best friend would react to this meeting. Hermione swung in front of Harry, with both hands now placed over the arm where his knife was stored. "Harry, you can't!"



He used his other hand to tenderly tuck a lock of hair that had fallen onto her face back under her wooly hat. "Hermione, you don't have to worry about me. Dudley is about our age, he had as much say in his parents' decision as I had."

This eased Hermione's worries greatly but she could still see Harry was up to something, he gently brushed passed her before holding his hand out to Dudley.

"Lord Harry James Potter, pleased to met you cousin."

Both girls were now looking on in amusement at the confusion on Dudley's face, he had no idea how to deal with this. Hermione also knew that the Dursleys were the worst kind of social snobs, Harry introducing himself as Lord Potter was priceless. Oh to be a fly on the wall when Dudley told his parents of this meeting.

"Cousin? I don't have any cousins. My Aunt Marge isn't married."

"Your mother and my mother were sisters, that makes us cousins."

Dudley wasn't having any of this. "My mother's sister married some drunken freak, they died in a car crash he caused. You're full of shit!"

This was a little too much for Harry, his attitude certainly hardened. "Lily Potter, used to be Evans, was my mother. She and my dad were murdered when I was just over a year old. I was sent to your house to live but your parents didn't want me. Looking at you, I have to think I certainly got the best of the deal. Please thank your parents for me."

Zit boy seized his chance. "He really is full of shit, why would a lord hang about with a loser like Granger? Are you going to let this cissy get away with that big-D? This arsehole deserves a kicking, walking into our manor and trying to pull a stunt like that."

Harry really didn't want this to turn into a fight, Dudley had played no part in his parents decision to reject their apparently only nephew. This mob may be the local bullies but he was a centurion, there was a massive difference between them. The choice was soon taken out

of his hands, Dudley's growl and then speed of movement practically owl posted his intentions.

"Get him!" Dudley's meaty fist swung, and hit nothing.

Harry had moved to the side and hammered his knee into his cousin's thigh as the fat boy stumbled passed, putting Dudley down with as little damage as possible. The next boy attempted to put the boot into Harry, only to have his foot caught while his standing leg was then swept from under him. Harry continued his spin, his still outstretched leg now catching a third boy in the groin. As the fourth decided to scram, Harry heard a scream from behind him.

Turning made Harry's blood boil, the acne warrior had whacked Hermione in the face and was now trying to run away. Padma may refuse to exercise with them but it didn't hinder her any. She'd pounced on his back like a wildcat, Padma was spitting and scratching like one to. Harry caught up in seconds, kicking right through the back of this bastard's left knee. He went down screaming in pain, Padma's weight on his back causing his face to kiss the pavement hard enough to break his nose and some teeth. Harry helped Padma to her feet and then they both dived back to Hermione.

She had one hand on the cinema wall supporting herself while the other was covering her mouth, there was blood seeping between her fingers. Harry's jacket was off and placed on the ground as Padma helped Hermione to sit on it. She was obviously in pain but the shock of someone actually punching her was also having an effect.

Harry was sitting next to her, wrapping Hermione in his arms. "I'm sorry Hermione, I had him tagged as the least dangerous of the bunch. I can't believe he did that, far less think he was going to get away with it."

Hermione's mumbled 'he's done it before' saw Harry having to grab Padma, she wanted to go and have another hit at the git. Hermione was surveying the scene of devastation displayed in front of her. Dudley was attempting to get up but appeared to have no control over his right leg. Jake was flat on his back and groaning while Johnny was curled up into a foetal position, clutching his groin. By far the worse was Tony, his leg appeared to be lying at an unnatural angle while his nose was bleeding all over the pavement.

The siren indicated they were going to have to give the cinema a miss, it looked like someone had phoned the police.

A/N thanks for reading

## Chapter 23

Dan opened the door to find a policeman standing there, his female counterpart was helping the three kids out the back of the police car that was currently parked in their drive. Seeing his daughter with a bloody cotton pad held over her mouth had Dan moving before the constable could even speak.

"Mr Granger, may we have a word?"

"Constable, I insist you both come inside. Just give me a moment to see my daughter is all right first."

Harry was standing beside Hermione, with his arm protectively around her shoulder. Dan made no attempt to move the lad, instead gently lifting Hermione's hand away from her mouth. The burst lips and damaged teeth had him practically growling in anger, he tried not to let it show as he led the group inside.

The three kids sat on the sofa with Hermione in the middle, her mother was soon kneeling in front of her with their first aid kit.

The policeman introduced both himself and his colleague, as P.C. Murphy and W.P.C. Johnstone, before supplying information on what had happened. "There was an altercation outside the cinema between these three and a group of five boys, all involved were around the same age. We would like to ask some questions and thought this would be a more comfortable situation, rather than dragging everyone down to the station. Your daughter also refused any treatment, saying both her parents were dentists."

The W.P.C. then took over. "Counting your daughter, there were five injuries - one of which was serious enough to require hospitalisation. Because of their age, we have asked them nothing more than names and addresses. Both Lord Potter and Miss Patil gave this address too."

Dan didn't understand why Harry had used his title, or the name Potter, but was just going to play along. "Both Harry and Padma are friends of my daughter's from school, all three attend the same private boarding school in Scotland. They are spending their Christmas holidays with us. This is Harry's godfather, Lord Black.

Are there going to be any charges here? Do I need to call our lawyer?"

P.C. Murphy shook his head. "At the moment, this is just a preliminary investigation. You are welcome to call your lawyer but that's not really necessary at this point."

As Emma was cleaning Hermione's mouth, Sirius could see his godson's barely contained rage. He would bet his fortune the boy now in the hospital was the same person who injured Hermione. "Harry, can you tell us what happened?"

"We were waiting to go into the cinema when a group of five boys approached us, they immediately began hurling insults..."

"I hope you didn't rise to them?" Dan would hate to think his daughter had gotten a sore face because of some taunts.

"No Dan. I discovered one of them was actually my cousin, I offered to shake his hand. They took this as some kind of insult and attacked. The one who hit Hermione was behind me, I'm really sorry..."

W.P.C. Johnstone was noting all this down. "Would the person that struck Miss Granger be Mr Dylan?"

This saw Emma explode. "He hit you again? We shall be back round at his parents' tonight..."

"Mrs Granger, you might want to leave that for now. Mr Dylan was taken away in an ambulance, I don't think his parents will be home anytime soon. Can I ask if any of the three children practice some kind of martial arts?"

It was Dan who answered the policewoman's question. "Harry runs to keep fit, but the only sport I know he practices is fencing. He's also teaching Hermione the basics."

P.C. Murphy then asked the question they really needed the answer to. "Can you tell us how Mr Dylan came to be injured so badly?"

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "If this Dylan guy is the person who attacked Hermione, pure bad luck. Padma jumped on his back and I

swung a kick at him. My kick tripped him up, and he hit the ground with Padma still on his back."

"Your kick dislocated his left knee! Can I ask how you dealt with the other three? Witnesses are all saying you made it look very easy."

"As Dan said, I fence. That doesn't help you in a fight, not one without a sword anyway, but it does really sharpen up your reflexes. I didn't use any special fighting techniques, I was just quicker than they were - especially Dursley."

Hearing that name, along with the other arsehole's was enough for Dan. "Constables, there is some well documented history between my daughter and these boys - though this is the first time it has involved the police. St. Andrew's primary school should have all the records, my wife and I were certainly down there often enough complaining about the bullying situation. With Hermione now at boarding school, we assumed the harassment problems would stop. It would appear we were wrong."

Hermione now had tears rolling down her cheeks, though not from the pain in her mouth. "They thought things would just be the same as before, they didn't reckon on my friends standing by me. I've never done a thing to Tony, yet that's the second time he's punched me in the face."

No one doubted Harry's conviction when he declared it wouldn't be happening a third time. This brought W.P.C. Johnstone back to an earlier point. "Was Mr Dylan the boy you claimed was your cousin?"

"No, that was Dursley."

"Was there any animosity there?"

"No, not from me. Dursley didn't even know I existed, so not from him either. Well, not because of that anyway. His parents apparently said mine died in a car crash, a crash my drunken dad caused..." Sirius was ready to storm out and find the Dursleys but Harry stopped him. "Sirius, my father has already taken care of it. The documents the Dursleys' signed ended any and all claim on me, they stopped being any family of mine there and then."

The W.P.C. continued her questioning. "You said you're parents died, yet mentioned your father..."

"I was adopted when just over a year old, I usually go by the name of Harry Crow. The Dursleys wouldn't recognise that name so I used the one I was born with. My adoptive father is one of the top bankers in the city of London, please let us know if we need to contact his lawyers."

P.C. Murphy didn't want to get caught in any crossfire between the police station, a couple of lords and any lawyers a top banker would know - especially over a preteen scuffle in the street. Since there was no hint of any kind of weapon being used, and the only injury requiring hospital treatment would seem to have occurred accidentally, he was pretty confident of the outcome.

"I don't see our superiors wanting to take this any further. Individuals may want to press charges but I think that then would become a matter for lawyers and the courts. What we have heard here matches statements taken from others in the cinema queue. The five boys approached and flung a few insults, insults these three didn't physically respond to. Lord Potter here was seen to hold his hand out, just as the large boy was observed throwing the first punch. Because of their ages, all of them will be taken home by a constable and their parents informed of what happened today. They will receive an official warning over the matter, and find themselves now having their future behaviour would be all the action we would intend to take on this incident."

W.P.C. Johnstone put her notebook away before saying any more. "Personally, I agree with Lord Potter, I can't see those boys bothering Miss Granger again. Crawley isn't exactly a large place, all their peers will soon know what happened. Four of them ended up on the ground as the fifth ran away, I don't think they will be bullying anyone for quite a while - and we will be watching to ensure they don't."

As Dan showed the constables out, Emma was going for their coats. "We'll need to take you down to the surgery love, there's too much damage for us to fix at home. I would like to thank you two for standing by Hermione again..."

Hermione's voice was slurred but it was to Harry she aimed her words. "This is not your fault Harry. You've taught me to look after myself, and how to deal with jerks like that - then I went and broke the first rule. I was too busy watching you, I never even noticed him until the punch hit me. He always was the sneakiness of the bunch. You and Padma made sure he won't be doing it again."

"I took my eye of him too, I should have been watching out for you two..."

Padma was having none of that. "We take extra defence lessons every week so we can look after ourselves Harry, Professor Weasley will give us hell when he hears what happened. Hermione and I are more than a match for him, we simply weren't paying attention - the very first thing the professor taught us to guard against."

Dan was putting his coat on before adding his own views. "The Dylans are every bit as obnoxious as the Dursleys, they won't take you putting their little angle in hospital lightly. We can expect a visit before too long."

Sirius was spoiling for a fight. "Let them come, I hope they bring the Dursleys with them."

"Sirius, I think we should let my father in on this. Gringotts can help, and our healers will easily fix Hermione in minutes. My portkey can take us all there."

Dan and Emma both knew how much work - and pain - would be involved in fixing Hermione's injuries. Stitching the inside of your daughter's mouth before attempting to repair broken teeth was not their idea of a fun evening. The group headed for Gringotts.

-oOoOo-

Albus felt as if he'd been punched in the mouth, Alastor Moody was in the castle and he didn't even know about it. What's more, it was obvious the old auror wasn't here to see the Hogwarts Headmaster. Albus accidentally came across the group leaving Minerva's office, with Filius clearly involved in the discussion too.



"Bill Weasley is a good place to start, but they will eventually need more. When they reach the stage where they're ready to learn how to fight dirty, tell the lad's father to contact me."

"Alastor, what are you doing in Hogwarts?"

"Leaving!"

That was all the answer Albus got as the group pushed past him, leaving the headmaster to wonder just how far his star had waned. That picture in the Prophet had seriously damaged his reputation, and focused people's attention on the allegations Harry had made. This situation would take a bit of recovering from, but he had one thing on his side - time.

Harry was only halfway through his first term and Albus needed to learn from the numerous mistakes he'd made since the lad entered the castle. He was also casting envious glances around him at the successes inside Hogwarts, in an attempt to emulate them.

Severus' gift may not have both the Hogwarts potions master and Harry on the best of terms, but at least it signalled a cessation of hostilities between them. At this moment in time, that was the best Albus could hope for from Harry. Personally handing the lad something that belonged to James Potter should at least start the healing process between them.

He was also loath to admit that Hogwarts new history professor was a stunning success. Albus may be loath to admit that fact, it didn't mean he wasn't going to attempt to copy the feat. Hiring a famous defence professor should achieve his aims on two levels. Hogwarts would have a competent professor at the defence helm, and then Harry wouldn't need William Weasley's services any more.

Albus was going to need every bit of the time he was sure he had, easing himself into a position where Harry trusted him wasn't going to happen overnight. Albus was currently aiming for fourth year, that should still give him time enough to influence Harry the way he wanted - for the greater good of course.

-oOoOo-

Emma couldn't believe the change in her daughter, and she wasn't referring to the miraculous healing the goblins had performed on Hermione. When this had happened before, she had been shattered - almost afraid to leave the house. Here she was, chatting and laughing with her friends as if nothing untoward had happened earlier today. That Harry wouldn't let go of her hand, even as the healer worked on her mouth, had certainly played a part in this new positive attitude. There was also a hint of anger directed at herself, Hermione had a strong desire not to be seen as some damsel in distress. Emma envisaged her daughter pushing their training even harder from now on.

After returning from Gringotts, Emma was in no mood to cook and none of them had felt like going out for dinner, the menu's had come out once more. Sirius professing a love of Chinese food, courtesy of being introduced to the cuisine by one Lily Potter, made the decision an easy one. Emma went to answer the door and pay the delivery driver. A loud roar informed the house this probably wasn't their Chinese food arriving.

An enraged Vernon Dursley burst into the dining room, his face almost purple as he sought his target and snarled. "Where is the little freak? I'll teach Lord fucking Potter not to attack my son..."

Dan and Sirius sprang at the enraged behemoth, only to be brushed aside. It wasn't Vernon who knocked them out the way though. A golden Harry smacked into the intruder so hard, he actually knocked his obese uncle over onto his back. Dursley's veins on his forehead were visibly pulsing with his volcanic temper, but at least he had stopped bellowing like a constipated bull elephant. The cause of this sudden silence though was currently a matter for debate.

It could have been his armoured nephew hitting him so hard, Vernon had no breath left in him to scream. Then again, Harry kneeling on his chest with a golden gauntlet squeezing his obese uncle's throat would certainly have to be factored into any calculation regarding his clearly enforced silence. Betting favourite though was the wicked goblin knife, a knife which was currently held rock steady by Harry's other hand about an inch from Vernon's left eyeball.

Petunia Dursley then ably demonstrated that her younger sister inherited all the intelligence in their family by proceeding to start

hitting Harry with her handbag. "Leave my Vernon alone you bully! Beating up my poor little Dudikins not enough..."

Thankfully, for the sake of Vernon's eyesight, Harry's armour meant she might as well be hitting him with a hyacinth as her handbag. Emma quickly pulled the skinny bitch off him though, just as Harry asked her a question.

"Emma, did you invite them into your home?"

"No I bloody didn't, the fat pig just pushed right past me."

The smile on Harry's face at that news was terrifying, especially if your name was Vernon Dursley. "Listen closely Dursley, I have no intention of repeating myself. You have forced your way into this house uninvited, that this house is under my protection means I can legally kill you right this minute. The only reason I don't is we're just about to eat, and it would put the others off their food. Know this though, I was raised by the goblins you left me with. I could quite happily slit your throat and then use your dying body as a sofa while eating my chicken chow mein."

The fact that everyone in the room could now smell urine was enough of a clue that Harry was being believed. "This house and this family are under the protection of my people. Your fat son goes anywhere near Hermione again, he'll simply disappear. A dragon doesn't leave much of what it eats, though its dung has a wonderful effect on your garden. If you don't want your precious Dudikins to become fertiliser for Emma's roses, make sure he calls his friends off too."

Harry stood and actually managed to drag Vernon to his feet. "Have you anything you'd like to add Lord Black?"

"Only that your mother would be extremely disappointed in her sister Lord Potter. Apart from that, they're not worth bothering about."

"We're done Dursley, you both made that decision over a decade ago. I was prepared to give your son the benefit of the doubt, he blew it. Like you, he charged right in and got his arse handed to him. My father only has one regret over my adoption, that he didn't gut you that day in his office. You should have seen his face when I told

him your son and his gang attacked us. He's very fond of Hermione too, so the name Dylan is probably joining yours on his shit list."

Dan had a final word for the now clearly frightened couple. "You have no idea what you're dealing with here. Any of those kids could have wiped the pavement with your son and his gang of thugs. Take Lord Potter's advice and stay well away, his father is not a goblin you want to mess with."

Dan and Emma marched both Dursleys out their house, returning to see Sirius casting cleaning charms on the carpet and that an unhappy Harry had shed his armour.

"Are you okay, Harry?"

"No Emma, I'm not. This is the shirt Hermione gave me for Christmas, and now I've gone and ruined it!"

The girl in question slipped the shredded shirt off her best friend, leaving Harry bare from the waist up. Hermione then took out her wand and cast a reparo spell at the garment, leaving it as good as new. This saw her hoisted into the air by a now delighted Harry.

Looking at Harry's bare torso saw a question being asked by Emma. "Harry, you're clearly quite a strong young lad. How the hell did you manage to drag that fat idiot up off his arse?"

Harry put Hermione down but didn't put his shirt back on just yet. "When the director placed my armour bands on me, he said 'may they bring strength to your arms in times of strife'. Centurion armour is known to add strength to a warrior's sword arm, but I am the first non goblin ever to wear this armour. When its active, I've discovered I can ask my magic to make me that little bit quicker or stronger. In my armour, I could probably hold my own arm-wrestling Hagrid."

His armour once more covered his body as he proceeded to demonstrate by lifting the oak dining room table.

Knowing he and Sirius would struggle to accomplish that feat between them, this led to Dan shaking his head. "I was already struggling with the whole wizard / goblin thing, now I've got Iron Man and the Hulk to add to the mix." The look of confusion this comment

was met with by Harry brightened Dan's evening. "Oh I need to introduce you to Peter Parker too, I've got quite the collection."

Hermione and Emma's groans left Harry not knowing what to expect. The doorbell ringing saw Dan going to answer it this time, with Sirius standing right behind him. They all enjoyed a lively dinner while Dan informed Harry about the wonderful world of comics.

-oOoOo-

Hermione saw Harry lying on his bed, studying a Spider-Man comic her dad had given him to read. Their eyes met and both voiced the exact same question. "Are you okay?"

This saw Hermione smile and sit on the bed beside her best friend. "I'm fine Harry, your healers saw to that. I'm more worried about how you are, after meeting the Dursleys?"

It took a minute for Harry to put his thoughts into words. "Disappointed is probably the best description of how I feel. I had dreamed of confronting those people for years, reality didn't come anywhere near my dreams. Having already met the son, I should have been prepared for the disappointment."

Hermione's hand slipped into his before he continued. "I think Sirius said it best, they really aren't worth bothering about. They are no family of mine, and I happen to think the family I do have are brilliant. You've had the unfortunate experience of growing up beside Dudley, for that I'm really sorry."

"That's not your fault Harry. I agree, none of the Dursleys are worth bothering about. I also know you were holding back today, that couldn't have been easy?"

"Actually, it was a lot easier than you might think. I'm a centurion, Hermione, that means what I do reflects on that position. I would be letting not only myself down, but the director, my father and my friends. Being a centurion is a great responsibility, even more so for me with the background I have. There are both goblins and wizards waiting to see me fail, I hope to keep them waiting for a long time. Revenge on the Dursleys is certainly not worth that price."

"I think I understand, Harry. I also happen to think the friends I have now are brilliant too - and would hate to let them down."

This led to some blushing smiles before Hermione changed the subject. "How are you getting on with Spider-Man?"

"I don't really understand it. What's a 'radioactive spider'? I've never heard of that species, do they have them at Hogwarts?"

Hermione held her laughter, instead thanking providence her dad hadn't started Harry off with the Fantastic Four. "Budge over, this is going to take a while." Explaining the marvellous world of Marvel to a goblin was not a five minute job.

Dan and Sirius found Emma leaning on Harry's door jamb, a beautiful smile on her face while tears slowly ran down her cheeks. Both men were concerned, those concerns vanished the instant they glanced toward where Emma was staring. Hermione was snuggled into Harry, a half-read Spider-Man comic laying across the sleeping pair.

Emma's voice was quiet but still conveyed her sense of wonder. "Do you remember what she was like the last time that arse punched her?"

Keeping his voice as quiet as his wife's, Dan's answer conveyed a different set of emotions. "She cried herself to sleep for nights after, I wanted to strangle the little shit. They look so peaceful, especially after the day they've just had."

This drew an answering nod from Emma. "That's what brought me here, I wanted to check that Harry was okay. It would seem Hermione had the same idea, and got here first. She also seems to have done a far better job than I could have."

Sirius was struggling to take his eyes off the young couple, and to understand why these two parents weren't in the least angry at the sight before them. Hermione was snuggled into Harry, her head resting on his chest. His godson had his right arm around Hermione, while his left had clearly held the now dropped comic. Both looked incredibly peaceful, and Emma obviously decided she wasn't going to disturb them. The comic was placed on Harry's nightstand before she removed a blanket from a drawer, covering both of them.

"His father had told me how close these two were, but you really need to see it for yourself..."

"Sirius, that is my little girl lying sleeping in your godson's arms. Don't ask me to explain it but I'm not even concerned, never mind angry. Now perhaps you'll understand why I said we would be seeing a lot of each other over the coming years?"

It was strange for Sirius to see Dan smile as Emma kissed both sleeping kids. "Barchoke was the first to see their connection, and explained how unusual it was for Harry to reach out to anyone like that. Hermione is exactly the same, we thought it was a different girl sending those letters home with that beautiful white owl. It's clear to see their friendship is helping both of them, and is something that Emma and I wholeheartedly approve of. Anything else, we will deal with as they get older - I can only hope they're a lot older before we even have to think about that."

"Dan, I am so out of my depth here, I have absolutely no idea of what to say or do. In all honesty though, the two of them lying there so peaceful, so content is one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen in my life."

Emma was now gently shoos both of them out the room. "I agree Sirius, and so does big bad Dan here. He's just annoyed about having spent years working on his protective father routine, only for some boy to render it obsolete before he even got a chance to use it. He adores your godson as much as I do, Dan's just not ready to admit it yet."

Dan quickly changed the subject. "Never mind that, what are we going to do about the Dursleys - and the Dylans?"

"We both know Petunia and Vernon are barely tolerated in Crawley, that obnoxious horse-faced bitch talks about everyone behind their backs. Well I intend to make sure our version of the truth gets out there, and is the one being believed."

Sirius was amazed at how this woman could go from being so tender and gentle with the kids, to now ready to rip the Dursleys to shreds. Dan though had a question. "Our version of the truth?"

"Well, it will be mostly true. How we were sick of the bullying and sent Hermione to a private boarding school, a school where she met her best friend - Lord Harry James Potter. An orphaned child who the Dursleys refused to care for, despite him being their only nephew. I also intend to let it be known that Tony Dylan punched our daughter in the face for the second time, and got his injuries running away. I'm sure Barchoke could provide us with receipts for the exclusive and private medical treatment Lord Potter arranged for his best friend, just to make the Dylans think twice about running to a lawyer."

"Okay...that's all mostly true..." Dan knew how protective they both were of Hermione, Emma apparently had just extended that protection to include Harry.

The marauder though had something to add to the conversation, a conversation that was still held in whispers. They were currently standing on the bedroom landing and there were three sleeping children in the house. "You may think that's enough, but I doubt if Barchoke will. I'm sure the Dursleys have trouble coming there way soon, these Dylans too if they start anything. You two were obviously concerned with Hermione but, as Harry said earlier, Barchoke was every bit as angry as his son over her injury."

After quiet goodnights were mumbled, the adults then all made their way to their respective bedrooms.

-oOoOo-

It was a slightly hungover, and very nervous Vernon who answered the door next morning. It was almost a relief seeing an irate Calum Dylan standing there. He led the man into the kitchen where he'd just left his third cup of coffee. Dudley was also there, sitting in his y-fronts and eating his large breakfast. The reason for his lack of attire was instantly obvious, his mother was currently rubbing lotion onto a wicked bruise that spread over most of his hip and thigh.

This was all Calum needed to see, he was barely containing his temper as it was. "I've spent most of last night at the hospital, Deirdre is still there. Tony spent hours in surgery, they had to rebuild his knee and wire a cracked jaw - that's not counting his broken teeth and nose. My son looks as if he's been hit by a bus and the police had the nerve to say they won't be pressing any charges.



They're claiming my Tony attacked the Granger girl, and his injuries were accidentally inflicted as he tried to run away. I was planning on heading round there to give the Grangers and their guests a piece of my mind, I stopped by to ask if you wanted to come too?"

Vernon's large body gave an involuntary shudder at that suggestion, and he decided that the coffee wasn't helping in the slightest. He pushed it away and went for the Glenfiddich, returning with the bottle and two glasses. Vernon poured one for himself and indicated for their visitor to help themselves, to a seat and a drink.

"Calum, we were round there last night, it wasn't pleasant." Vernon needed a swig of his twelve year old single malt before he could continue. "We know of the boy who did this, how could we not, he's Petunia's nephew. Over ten years ago they tried to dump the brat on us after his parents were murdered, we wouldn't stand for it and put him up for adoption. That was why we moved to Crawley, in the hope they wouldn't find us. Petunia and I decided last night it was time to move again. The man this brat now calls father is not someone you want to cross, he would give the mafia a bad name."

Another shudder was treated by administering more single malt. "There's even a godfather on the scene as well. When we were considering moving house ten years ago, Petunia made some enquires about him. He was slapped in a high security prison for committing multiple murders, yet now he's clearly out. So you see, Calum, there is more chance of me winning slimmer of the year than going back round to the Grangers. Your Tony actually punched their daughter in the face, a daughter whose hand this boy was holding as they walked around Crawley. Go if you must, but you might not get out of that house in one piece."

Calum reached for the bottle and poured some of the liquid gold into the glass provided, what the hell was he supposed to do now?

-oOoOo-

At the Grangers, the house woke once more to the thwack - thwack of Harry and Hermione practicing in the back garden. Sirius was nursing his cup of coffee while standing to the side, watching these two go at it with their wooden practice swords and shields. Their concentration seemed immense, so out of place for people their age.

The marauder thought this scene needed lightning up, so fired a mild stinging hex at his godson. Sirius yelped in surprise, and then pain, as his stinging hex was reflected straight back at him. He'd spilled hot coffee all over his hand too, dropping the cup onto the decking in the process. His wand soon joined his spilled coffee and cup, Hermione had spun and whacked his other hand with the tip of her practice sword.

The thankfully rounded wooden tip was now resting on Sirius' chest as a confident young witch spoke to him. "Harry said that if you take away a wizard's wand, they're helpless in a fight. It would seem he was right..."

Sirius though had another trick up his sleeve, Padfoot made an appearance and was about to pounce on the surprised girl - the mutt never even got to move.

Harry's knife sprayed strange looking ropes out the blade, wrapping the big black dog up like a belated Christmas present. "Harry?"

"I was trying for a web, you know - like Spider-Man. Curse-breaker Weasley is always telling us magic is all about intent. Looks like I haven't quite got it yet."

"No Harry, where the hell did the dog come from? Is that still Sirius?"

"I assume he's an animagus, just like Professor McGonagall - except a dog. There's not much more I know, it's a form of transfiguration goblins are physically unable to perform, Because of that, we don't exactly have a lot of books on the subject."

The whining now coming from the dog saw Harry release the bindings, and Sirius was soon with them once more. "That was bloody brilliant you two, I can't tell you how impressed I am at that. You fairly and squarely disarmed an adult wizard, and I would never have tried that move against your real sword. Well done Hermione."

Sirius could see the girl stand that little bit taller, her confidence had taken a blow too yesterday. Dan had also been watching and couldn't help but proudly smile at the way his daughter had reacted. Here was another reason Hermione hadn't cried herself to sleep last night, his little girl could now look after herself.

After extracting a promise from Sirius to tell them everything he knew about becoming an animagus, Hermione raced Harry up the stairs to take their showers. They were finally joined by Padma and the trio were soon at the breakfast table, where they were greeted by Emma - wearing a satisfied smirk on her face.

"That was Martha Jenkins just off the phone, supposedly enquiring how Hermione was - the story is apparently all over town. What she really phoned for was to discover if the rumours were true, and we actually do have a lord staying with us. When I told her no, we had two, she was practically salivating down the phone. We're all invited to her New Year party. When the story spreads - and it will - I expect a few more invitations to be coming our way. You can also bet the Dursleys won't be receiving any, I may have mentioned how they placed their only nephew up for adoption."

Hermione's nose was wrinkling in distaste. "I don't want to go anywhere if we're only invited because Harry's a lord."

This drew laughter from Sirius. "I think you better get used to that Hermione, the Minister of Magic was desperate to invite Harry to the Ministry New Year Ball - only to discover he couldn't."

That news generated laughter from Harry. "Our nation would refuse any invitation coming through the Department for Control of Dangerous Creatures, and their own laws prevent any other department from doing so. That was why I asked Susan if her Aunt Amelia could talk to my father. With us not being at school, they don't have that option."

Then Sirius dropped the bombshell. "Your father thinks the rules may be changed, allowing you to be officially invited to the Ministry Summer Ball."

"Won't we be on holiday..." Hermione's words died in her throat as she spotted the change in Harry, he was clearly working out the implications of this - and liking what he found.

"Hermione, this is huge - even bigger than huge. If me getting dressed up and smiling for the minister one summer evening can change things for my nation, you better believe we will be there."

This drew a wide smile from Sirius, and none of those present at breakfast had missed Harry's 'we will be there' either. "Just as well your father arranged a new tutor then, you need to learn all the do's and don't's associated with being a lord. Augusta Longbottom has probably been installing this into Neville since he was old enough to listen. We still want him to attend lessons though, we'll need four when practicing dancing and such."

This certainly held the girl's attention, though Harry's thoughts had gone off in a different direction. There was something fishy here, "...and who did my father get to teach us this?"

Sirius couldn't contain his smile. "Me! You're getting Lord Sirius Orion Black teaching you all about wizarding traditions and customs every weekend. Neither Dumbledore nor the ministry will dare object to this. Merlin, both would probably pay for it out their own pockets. You still get Bill in the morning for defence, and then me in the afternoon. There is so much I need to teach you..." Sirius had his wand out underneath the table as the three kids listened intently. It was time for a payback prank to make up for getting his arse handed to him earlier.

Harry could practically feel the heat generated from having a blushing witch sitting either side of him. He was struggling to determine the cause, until he looked up. "Mistletoe?"

Hermione was bright red as she asked her question. "You know what that is Harry?"

"Yeah, a parasitic plant. Why would you want it in your house?"

Padma tried to help her friends. "When a boy and girl are under mistletoe, it's customary that they kiss..."

Harry shrugged his shoulders and kissed Padma on the cheek, turning then to do the same for Hermione.

Padma's blush got even deeper. "Not a kiss like that Harry..."

Harry already thought Sirius was setting him up, he'd drawn his knife while turning round to kiss Hermione. Hearing this decided his course of action. "We'll, that leaves only one option..."

Harry transfigured the mistletoe into a live bat, a bat that immediately chased his godfather. Sirius, not being able to fire off offensive spells indoors, had to race out the back garden before being able to deal with the creature. Dan and Emma had sat enthralled at this drama being played out before them, they now fell about with laughter.

Harry leaned over and gently kissed Hermione on the lips. "Neither of you need mistletoe, you are both beautiful witches."

Sirius surveyed the scene from the back door and thought godfather 0 - godson 2. He actually couldn't be happier with that score. Clearly he wasn't going to have to teach his godson how to woo witches. Harry may be blushing but his godson was already way ahead of either Padfoot or Prongs at the same age in his dealings with the fairer sex.

Dan had just watched a boy kiss his daughter but still couldn't stop laughing, Harry had reversed Sirius' prank brilliantly. Anyway, it wasn't everyday you got to see someone chased away from their breakfast by a live bat! The kids were only going to be here for a few more days, but Dan was willing to bet those days would be ringing with even more laughter.

-oOoOo-

Smita could hardly believe the reaction they got when stepping onto platform nine and three quarters. It spread like ripples in a pond, within seconds everyone knew they had arrived. Padma had tried to prepare her for this, but mere words didn't prepare you for an entire railway platform stopping and staring. Harry and Hermione had stayed at the Patil house last night, allowing their home to be warded and leaving Ramrao and Smita to get everyone to Kings Cross.

Her daughter had also explained that they would be showing a united front, this being the first time they had appeared in the wizarding section of Britain since those trial pictures of Harry were published after Christmas. Padma and Hermione had their duelling robes on, with the muggle-born witch wearing her sword for the first time in public. Harry had shrunk all their trunks and tucked them in his bag, their only luggage being Hermione's cat carrier. The group

were soon joined by Neville, also wearing his duelling robes, before the first flash signalled the press interest.

Harry stood for a moment with his friends while pictures were taken, though refused to answer any questions. Ramrao then put a stop to the press intrusion, allowing Smita and Augusta to get the five of them on the train. Their goodbyes were short so they could get to the safety of a carriage, it was going to be almost six months before they all met again.

Their summer schedule had been worked out and the Longbottoms and Bones sent a copy, the Patils had all sat last night as Padma excitedly explained where they would be going, and when.

Ramrao and Smita wouldn't allow their twins to be apart for an entire summer, and this was not a situation their girls would want either. Both were delighted to see plans being made to include not only them, but Parvati too. Padma obviously wanted to spend as much of the summer as possible with her friends, and they were looking to be joining them after the first three weeks. They hoped to stay for two, with Parvati remaining for the final week too. There were a lot more details that would be required to be sorted out but both Patil parents had provisionally agreed to the plan that would see Padma, Harry and Hermione spending six weeks of their holiday together.

Smita had to hide her smile when Harry put his foot down and declared their guest list for the summer was now full. She had spoken with Parvati about trying to moderate her exuberance around the group. Unfortunately, that natural exuberance jumped a few notches when in the company of her friend, Lavender. By making that declaration, Harry had effectively excluded Lavender before Parvati could even bring her friend's name up.

Amelia Bones joined them as Susan and Hannah headed onto the Hogwarts Express, the parents and guardians chatted away until the shriek of the steam whistle signalled it was time for the train to leave the station. None of the four standing there knew what nineteen ninety two would bring, all though thought it would be different because of now knowing a certain Harry Crow.

A/N thanks for reading.

## Chapter 24

There was a certain apprehension of expectation hanging heavy in the air, a tension that had been felt on the train but assuredly climbed in intensity as the four friends entered the great hall. The friends appeared to be the only ones unaffected by this apprehensive atmosphere, chatting amongst themselves as to why three of them could see the Thestrals - yet Neville could not. The group were sitting at the Ravenclaw table, discussing whether watching as Harry saved Hermione and Padma from the troll counted as seeing death, the troll certainly ended up deceased. They were deliberately paying no attention to what was happening around them, that couldn't be allowed to continue.

"Big brass ones, Fred."

"Brass? Our Harry here wouldn't settle for anything so coarse and common as brass. Pure diamond, hardest substance known to man."

"Ah gentlemen, well Fred and George - how was your holiday?"

"Obviously not as exciting as yours..."

Harry laughed at that. "Guys, you don't know the half of it. Now a certain Padfoot wondered if the best pranksters in the school might just have come across an old piece of parchment that belonged to him?"

Gobsmacked was a new look for the twins, but they seemed to have no problem pulling it off.

"If so, he was also wondering if you would consider passing this piece of parchment on to the son of Prongs - namely yours truly!"

Yes, both Fred and George could now claim to have mastered the gobsmacked look.

Enjoying watching the twins in this state, Harry used his most officious voice to deliver the final part of his message. "If the answer to both of those questions were to be yes, I'm authorised to set up a meeting between yourselves and the aforementioned marauder, Padfoot."

Harry found a piece of old parchment being thrust into his hands as the twins sank to their knees and bowed. "Oh mighty son of Prongs, we are honoured to be in the same castle with one such as you..."

"Can we really meet Padfoot?"

This was too much for Harry and he started to laugh. "How does Saturday grab you?" It was Harry who found himself grabbed by two emotional twins.

"You wouldn't play a prank on us about this..."

"...because that would be seriously unfunny."

Hermione was the one who put their minds at rest, well, kicked those devious minds into overdrive actually. "Guys, he stayed at my house for most of last week. I don't think I've ever seen my parents laugh so much, the prank war between the three of us and him really escalated. Staying at Padma's last night was the first time I was able to sleep with both eyes closed this week."

The twins wanted details but the staff entering meant they and Neville had to head over to the Gryffindor table. "Told you George, that boy is a diamond."

"We need a better name than 'Budgie' for the son of Prongs though..."

Roger, like most of the hall, had been watching Harry. "It really doesn't bother you that Dumbledore is going to be sitting just up there?"

"If it did, Roger, I wouldn't have returned. My issues with the old man are still the same as they were in September. There may be one or two more questions I would like a truthful answer to but, apart from that, nothing has really changed."

"You really think holding a sword to Dumbledore changes nothing?"

"For me it doesn't," Harry honestly answered. "The man pulled a wand on an unarmed member of my family, not something I was



ever going to stand there and allow. Problem dealt with and over, I'll bet Dumbledore wants to forget all about it too."

This saw Roger shaking his head, "I never thought I would agree with the Wesley twins, but definitely diamond, Harry."

When Dumbledore stood, welcomed everyone back and began the feast, it was like pulling the plug in the bath and the tension began to drain from the castle. It would appear Harry was right, and the headmaster wanted nothing more than to forget all about that humiliating picture.

It was a different picture that had sent tempers soaring at Malfoy Manor. The sight of Crow wrapped in the new Lord Black's arms put the final touch to what had already been a pretty dismal Christmas.

Normally, the Malfoy family would have to decide which parties or balls they would grace with their presence. This Christmas they hadn't received one single invitation, not even to the Annual Ministry New Year Ball. With no gold to even consider holding one of their own, and dreading facing the possible indignity of no one bothering to attend if they had, it was easily the worst Christmas of Draco's life.

Then to see any hope of receiving the Black inheritance disappear, on the front page of the Prophet no less, was just kicking someone while they were down. It was now obvious why his mother could never access the Black vaults, Sirius must have named someone as his heir. The reaction of both parties shown in that photograph made it pretty obvious just who that someone was. Not content with freezing the Malfoy fortune, Crow had now stolen his Black inheritance too.

His father had instructed him to keep an eye on Crow, and especially those around him. Draco would have done that anyway. What he needed was someone to wind up and point at Crow. The problem with that idea though was Draco couldn't think of anyone stupid enough to actually do that, the whole of magical Britain must have seen his sword at Dumbledore's throat.

As if that wasn't bad enough, the mudblood bitch was now walking about with a clearly goblin forged blade on her hip too. Draco would have loved to get her into trouble for that but was sure they would have checked the Hogwarts handbook and found some loophole

that allowed it. If someone else wanted to put forward a complaint, Draco would sit back and enjoy the show. His main objective at Hogwarts though was to stay out of Crow's way. With his mother paying tuition and board for all seven years, he really had no other options.

-oOoOo-

Hermione rhapsodised over the charm work involved in making the marauder's map, Padma's eyes twinkled wickedly as she claimed they could spy on who was using all the school broom cupboards. Harry though had an entirely different approach from both his friends. He thought of the wonderful tactical advantages the map supplied, and wondered if any of the staff had similar items.

This drew a harumph from Hermione, "Why does everything have to be about battles and tactics with you, Harry."

He pointed toward where Moonlight was currently stalking the tasseled end of a woollen scarf, hanging over a sofa in the common room. "Would you say your kitten was having fun?"

"Of course she is..."

"...yet at the same time Moonlight's practicing skills she will need as she grows into adulthood. Goblins are a warrior race, so what they teach their children has practical uses. Gaining an advantage over an opponent, whether in banking or combat, is a skill that needs to be nurtured. Just like you would be taught not to touch hot things, or eat stuff that would do you harm, we just have a different set of survival skills. Padma or I wouldn't have a clue how to cross one of your busy London roads without getting knocked down, I'll bet that was something you were taught from a very young age."

"Yes, we had the green cross code man. The actor then went on to play Darth Vader in the Star Wars series."

"Okay, I'm with Harry on this one. Basically because I didn't understand a word of what you just said. Well, that's not exactly true. I recognised it was english, even most of the words, it was just the order you used them in that confused the hell out of me."

Hermione appeared ready to go into far greater detail until Padma put her finger against her friend's lips. "Stop, Hermione. You telling us more about Green Vader or Darth Wars isn't going to help. We simply don't have anything to compare it to."

She admitted defeat, for now. Hermione promised both of them would be watching Star Wars just as soon as she could manage it. It was time for bed after a tiring day.

-oOoOo-

The week seemed to drag as they waited for the weekend. Saturday finally came and they briskly headed off for their extra defence lesson. Harry and Hermione had kept up their exercising throughout the holidays so picked right up where they had left off, Padma and Neville weren't so lucky - Professor Weasley pushed them hard.

With Professor Flitwick attending for the second half of the lesson, both of their swords got to see some action. Filius was full of praise for how quickly Hermione was progressing, but was left speechless in his battle with Harry.

As their blades clashed while both fought for the advantage, the charms professor suddenly found himself with a long stalk of celery in his hand - where once had been a sword. This was sliced through before Harry's blade shot out strange ropes that wrapped the shocked head of house up tightly.

"How did you do that?" was all Filius could manage to say.

"I don't know sir, but ever since that fight at Sirius' trial I've been able to cast with my sword."

"I would tell no one about this Harry, it could be a big advantage for you."

"My father is already excited at the prospect of my next duel with Master Sharpshard, he wants a copy of that memory for himself, and the director."

After lunch, it was finally time for the lesson they had all been looking forward to. Sirius didn't disappoint. He went over the basics of polite behaviour before changing the environment into that of a

dance. He also had one more trick up his sleeve, Professor Hobson was invited along to be his dance partner.

They demonstrated the steps and then had both couples emulate their actions. Harry and Hermione were both quick learners but Neville struggled, probably from having the young witch in his arms. Sensing this, Padma took action.

"So, Longbottom, you're fine with firing curses at me all morning, but can't handle putting your hand on my waist?"

"What, no...well, not really."

"Neville, we're friends. Relax and let's enjoy dancing together. If your hand goes somewhere inappropriate, my knee will let your groin know."

This had Neville laughing and soon saw him relax. He did ensure his hand didn't slip in the slightest though, Neville was positive Padma wasn't joking about that knee.

Harry and Hermione were sure this would be their favourite lesson of the week, holding each other as they learned to dance was just fine as far as they were concerned. Sirius though threw a spanner into their works.

"At a formal ball, you will be expected to dance with other people too..."

Sirius said this while cutting in on the best friends, leaving Harry dancing with the professor while he twirled Hermione around the floor.

"Harry, I know I'm not Hermione but it is customary to at least pay your dance partner some attention."

"Sorry professor, I've kinda lost my enthusiasm for balls if it means I have to watch Hermione dancing with other people. I have no problems with family or friends, but does this mean anyone can just walk up and she has to dance with them?"

Henrika just had to laugh, this was so strange for her. She had a young man in her arms, yet he was worried about who his girl was

possibly going to be dancing with. For the veela, this was simply priceless. It was usually the ladies who were worried about the gentleman she was dancing with. "Harry, you really are something else. If Hermione were to attend a ball as your date, any gentleman would have to ask your permission to dance with her. I'll make sure Sirius teaches you the ins and outs of that maze of social quicksand. Even though you may think she's worth it, I'm sure the director wouldn't want one of his centurions starting a 'goblin rebellion' over Hermione's dance card."

While the mere thought of someone like Malfoy or Ron Weasley with their arms around Hermione had him wanting to draw his sword, this news drew a smile from Harry. He was a centurion though for a reason. "Why Professor Hobson, are you teasing me? I noticed you were very close to my godfather, should I be worried?"

She couldn't help but smile at his comeback. "It is rare to find men who are unaffected by my allure, but two in the one family! Thankfully, your godfather is neither my employer nor eleven - even though he appears to act younger than you sometimes."

"I heard that! Did you miss me?"

"When I had such a charming replacement? I hardly think so, Lord Black. Unfortunately, this young goblin did miss his dance partner, leaving me heartbroken and stuck with you."

This was all said with a smile as the dancing resumed with the original couples intact.

"You seemed sad when you were dancing Harry, I thought every male in the castle wanted to be in Professor Hobson's arms?"

"She was explaining that there are rules for balls and dances, I didn't like the idea that whoever wants could just come along and we would have to dance with them. Sirius will need to teach me the rules before I end up having to fight duels for telling folk to get lost. There must be a polite way of refusing without having to draw my sword, I'll just have to learn it."

Hermione found her head resting on his chest. "My protector from trolls, even those in dress robes. We really do need a better name for you than budgie, I think 'swift' fits the bill, and it's still a bird."

"I think we need to swiftly dance with Padma and Neville, before Sirius decides to split them up. Neville's just beginning to cope with Padma, Professor Hobson would blow his mind."

Harry enjoyed dancing with Padma, and could see Hermione and Neville having fun together too. He could imagine a group of them going to a dance and having a ball together, Harry began to relax after realising things were nowhere near as bad as he first thought.

It was a happy group who left the room of requirements, to find Dumbledore waiting for them in the corridor. Sirius, Henrika and especially Harry were all instantly on high alert. Dumbledore attempted to be as non threatening as possible as he held out the parcel in his hands.

Albus needed this to work and had studied what he was going to say closely. He'd noticed the lad always referred to Barchoke as his father, while James and Lily were mum and dad. Even a little thing like this could be the difference between making a connection with the lad or being rebuffed again.

"Harry, your dad left this with me. I think it's time it was returned to it's rightful owner."

It was with great caution Harry took the offered parcel, he even used his knife to slice through the wrappings. The shimmering material the parcel held drew an audible gasp from Sirius. "Harry, that's your father's invisibility cloak. He got it from his father, it's been in the Potter family for generations..."

His face could have been carved from stone but Harry was living up to the twins' billing. The young centurion's eyes were like diamonds, diamonds that were cutting into an uncomfortable Dumbledore. "Can I ask how this came to be in your possession, Headmaster Dumbledore?"

For the life of him Albus couldn't understand the hostility that was simply pouring off the lad, what had he done wrong this time? "I asked your dad if I could borrow the cloak to study it, I never got the chance to return it..."

At that, Harry turned his back on the headmaster. He needed information from his godfather. "Sirius, my father says my mum and dad were a very smart couple, would you agree with that?"

"Your dad was very smart Harry, but your mum was simply brilliant."

"Then please help me understand, Sirius, because this makes them appear like a couple of idiots. Why would these two clever people give up a potentially life-saving tactical advantage, just so Albus bloody Dumbledore could study it?" Harry's hostility had switched to absolute fury, and only one person had any hope of containing the explosion.

His best friend had her hand back on his arm and speaking in the gentlest voice she could. "Harry, we don't understand what you're trying to say. Can you explain..."

He seemed transported to another time and place, it was also as if he and Hermione were the only two people in the entire world. Quick as a flash, Harry had the cloak around her shoulders.

"Lily, take Harry and go! It's him! Go! Run! I'll hold him off..."

Hermione was instantly caught up in the moment too, mesmerised by the intensity in those green eyes. "I...I don't think I can leave you...you can't ask me that..."

"You must, our son will need one of us..."

Harry's forehead was now resting on Hermione's as he pleaded with her, before leaning back and flicking the cloak's hood up. Hermione may have disappeared but no one was looking in her direction anyway, all eyes were on Harry.

It took three attempts before Sirius managed to get his throat to actually make some noise. "Dear Merlin, Harry, do you remember that night?"

The young lad was bereft of emotion as he glacially answered his godfather with words he'd not spoken since being a scared little child, being wakened from a nightmare. "Not Harry, not Harry, please not Harry! - Stand aside you silly girl ... stand aside now. -

Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead ... Not Harry! Please ... have mercy ... have mercy... "

An invisible sobbing girl smashed into her best friend, shocking him back to the present. Harry noticed there wasn't a dry eye in the corridor, even Dumbledore had tears on his cheeks. That didn't stop Harry focusing on the old wizard, though his rage was back under control. "My mum and dad could have gone anywhere in the world, yet they stayed in a cottage and hid behind an obscure spell. They had a means of escape yet handed it over to you. These are not the actions of the smart people everyone tells me they were. There is not one shred of doubt both of them loved me, my dad and mum gave their lives so I could live. As their son, I swear I will get to the bottom of what happened that night, and any part you played in it, Headmaster. I thank you for returning my property."

It was disconcerting, and downright weird, seeing a pair of arms that had emerged out of nowhere and circled around Harry's torso. Just as Harry seemed to have his arm hanging suspended in midair, right about where the sound of sobbing was slowly stopping. "Sirius, I'm not really up to dinner with the twins, and you did promise. I'll see you for lessons tomorrow..."

Harry walked away, whispering to a still invisible Hermione as he went. Padma was holding onto Neville and crying too, Henrika was watching them closely. Sirius didn't know whether to cry or hit someone. Dumbledore nearly made his mind up for him.

"Sirius, surely you don't think I had anything to do with..."

"I wouldn't believe Albus bloody Dumbledore if he said tomorrow was Sunday. I can promise you this though, you'll find a goblin blade in your gut if you did have anything to do with James and Lily's deaths. Whether the hand holding that blade is Harry's, his father's or even Miss Granger's is something I hope you never have to discover."

Henrika helped her two students along, with Sirius following on behind. Albus was left standing in the corridor alone, with his plan shattered into a million pieces. What was worse, he had absolutely no idea of what had just taken place - how could a simple gift go so horribly wrong?



-oOoOo-

Hermione was using a hanky to wipe her eyes, and trying to lighten Harry's mood. "Your dad and your godfather would be very proud of you. You've not had that cloak an hour yet, but already used it to smuggle a girl into your room."

He did try to smile but Harry's heart wasn't really in it at the moment. "Not when they found out I'd made that same girl cry..."

Hermione was soon sitting beside him, and slipping her hand into his. "Oh Harry, you didn't make me cry. It was just discovering you could remember that horrible night that shocked everyone."

"Our healers think it's a consequence of having a part of Voldemort inside me, even if only for a few days. They couldn't tell whether they were my memories, or the last few seconds of his. My father was offered the chance to remove them but declined, I'm glad he did. Those memories might not be very nice but they're all I've got of my mum and dad, I couldn't lose them. Those memories are also the reason I will finish off Voldemort, not because of some stupid prophecy."

Hermione just squeezed his hand, what other answer could she give.

Harry asked Hogwarts if she could let their friends and Sirius know they were fine. The castle took it a step further and provided them both with an evening meal. They enjoyed a quiet night together before using the map and cloak to smuggle Hermione safely, and unseen, back to her dorm.

-oOoOo-

Things were back to normal by their run and exercises next morning, though Padma drew a few strange glances in the common room when she flew into Harry's arms as they met before going down to breakfast.

"I'm fine, Padma. I hadn't thought of that for a while, it kinda jumped out on me..."

"I'm just glad you took Hermione with you, no one should have been alone after remembering that."

"The hat put me in Ravenclaw for a reason, Padma. It would have been an incredibly stupid idea not to have Hermione with me, and a stupid Ravenclaw is a contradiction in terms. There's also the matter of needing a crowbar to get her arms to let go..."

A hand slipped into its usual place on his arm. "You wish, Crow, you wish."

Hermione being the one doing the teasing generated smiles from both Harry and Padma as the trio headed off for breakfast, and to meet Neville.

Albus and Henrika were both pleased to see Harry appeared back to his normal self, though for different reasons. The young history professor had been as shocked as anyone last night at Harry's revelations, it had taken a dinner with Sirius and the Weasley twins to lift her spirits. It would seem an evening with Hermione had fulfilled the same function for the young centurion.

It was more relief that Albus felt, relief that he didn't seem to have done any more permanent damage than what transpired last night. The young man now sitting with his friends at the Ravenclaw table looked the picture of health and contentment. Had Harry sat there sullen, and staring daggers at his headmaster, it would have led to questions Albus didn't want to answer. His biggest question though was where did he go from here? Albus was going to have to rely on providence presenting an opportunity for him to exploit, he had nothing else left at his disposal.

-oOoOo-

After their lesson with Sirius, he asked for some time to chat with his godson. Professor Hobson took the other three along, leaving the pair to say what was needed.

"I spoke to your father last night, he told me about the nightmares when you were younger."

"I was three or four, Sirius, I've got over it. Just thinking how they could have used my dad's cloak brought it all back, spending some time with Hermione helped me put those memories back in their box."

Seeing his godson didn't want to talk about it, and being warned by Barchoke to expect this reaction, Sirius changed the topic. "Henrika told me you were worried about other guys trying to muscle in on your date, well there are quite a few ways you can put a stop to that..."

Harry was now all ears as the castle once more provided food, just as well as the time appeared to fly away.

"Now, when speaking to your father last night, he was totally unaware of the very important date that's just over four weeks away. From that, I assume that you've never heard of Valentine's Day either? February the fourteenth is a day that can make or break you, so there has to be some thought goes into it. The worst thing possible is to be running around at the last minute, trying to pull something out the fire for your loved one. We both know Hermione deserves better than that."

"Sirius, if this is a prank, I swear I'll..."

"Ask Neville, and then decide what you want to do. My offer of help extends to him too, being raised by his gran might not have prepared him for this. I promise I won't make a fool of you, it might not be a wooden sword in Hermione's hand next time."

Harry wouldn't commit to any more just now, not at least until he had spoken to Neville about it.

"Oh, I meant to say to you yesterday. You can relax, all those nasty betrothal contracts have been refused. I just wrote a standard letter for all of them and your father arranged their delivery..." Sirius stopped talking as Harry had a worried look on his face, the marauder's map was soon spread in front of him.

"Harry, what's the matter?"

"I hope nothing...oh shit, I really should know better. My luck seems to be running about its usual level, please tell me those weren't two of the names you refused?" The map clearly showed Hermione and Padma moving along to Ravenclaw Tower after dinner. What neither of the girls could see was that Marietta and Cho appeared to be standing waiting for them.

-oOoOo-

Both girls had really enjoyed their extra lessons today, and were giggling amongst themselves at how well Sirius and Professor Hobson were getting along. It already seemed a sure thing that Sirius would be there if and when she joined them on their summer holiday. They were also sure Sirius could cope better upon seeing the beautiful blonde in a bathing suit than Neville would. It was also wrong to giggle at the thought their friend's head might actually explode from embarrassment, that didn't stop them giggling though. It was only after they were spoken to that the girls noticed they had company.

"We have two happy witches here, Marietta, looks like this pair never got sent letters saying they weren't wanted."

"Yeah, we never even got a chance. These two had their hooks into him since that first night. Not bloody fair, my father is angry and accusing me of not really trying. What was I supposed to do?"

Hermione tried to stay calm, and prevent this escalating into a fight. "It wouldn't have made any difference no matter what you would've done..." Cho jumped right down her throat before she could say anymore.

"So sure of yourself, aren't you, Granger? It's no wonder no one else can stand you."

There was a time those words could have decimated Hermione, but she now knew they were merely said out of spite. The girl currently by her side had stayed right there on more than one sticky occasion, and showed no inclination to run away here. Hermione was also good friends with Neville, witches and wizards from all four houses, and then of course there was Harry. Just thinking about him gave her the strength and confidence to say what she intended.

"If you would just shut up and listen, I'll give you the information you're missing. Goblins don't use betrothal contracts, believing their children should choose their own mates. Lord Black refused all the betrothal contracts his godson had received."

This caused Marietta to stop and think, but Cho had already assigned a name to all her perceived injustices and woes. That name was Hermione Granger. "You still think you're going to stroll into Hogwarts and waltz away with the big prize, the boy-who-lived is not for the likes of you."

Padma was wishing they hadn't swapped their duelling robes for the dancing lessons, that didn't mean she was going to back down though. "Oh I don't know, Cho, Hermione's just spent the last few hours waltzing in Harry's arms. He didn't seem to mind at all..."

Cho knew her family were counting on her snagging the boy-who-lived, the prestige, not to mention the fortune, would catapult the Changs straight into the top echelon of British magical society. To have all that snatched away from her by this plain little witch with no breeding was not something she was going to stand for.

"I'll show Harry who the better witch is...diffindo!" Cho cast the cutting curse with enough force to slice through clothes and draw some blood. All the blood drained from her face as the curse just bounced right off.

Hermione had every confidence her bracelet would protect her from anything Cho Chang was able to cast. That was why, instead of dodging, Hermione took the decision to take the hit while she drew her sword. As the spell rebounded, Cho stood there stunned for a second, this was all the time Hermione needed. Her sword whispered through the air, and removed the top inch and a half of her attacker's wand.

Marietta stood with her hands up and held palm outward, the universal sign she was unarmed. Padma now had her wand out, covering Marietta so she wouldn't interfere.

Harry had easily outrun his godfather, arriving on the scene as the point of Hermione's sword had a now terrified Cho pinned against the corridor wall. Padma had her wand out, covering Hermione's back as they had begun to draw a crowd. "Are you both okay?"

"We're fine, Harry, Cho here wanted to prove to you and the school who was the better witch. I think Hermione just settled that argument, don't you?" Padma wanted no one to be in any doubt who had won here, though a clearly terrified Cho was a rather large visual clue.

McGonagall soon bustled along the corridor. "Kindly lower that blade this instant, Miss Granger, and I would appreciate an explanation." The Deputy Headmistress's tone told everyone this was not a request, rather a demand.

Hermione sheathed her blade. Disgusted with herself that the look of terror on Cho's face had initially excited her, Hermione Granger was no bully. "We had a private disagreement, professor. It should not have escalated to this, and for that I apologise."

"I want to know what this 'private disagreement' was about, and also why you resorted to using a sword on a fellow student?"

Not wanting Cho's personal business broadcast all over the castle, Hermione dug her heels in. "The first part is not mine to tell, professor. I drew my sword purely for defence, and it's against Hogwarts rules to use magic in the corridors."

Harry had a quick whispered conversation with Padma and had his suspicions confirmed, he stepped beside Hermione. "Professor, perhaps I can offer an explanation."

"Were you involved in this too, Mr Crow?"

"Not directly, but I believe a misunderstanding may have been the cause. I would like to clear up that misunderstanding, to make sure this doesn't happen again."

McGonagall couldn't really say no to that. The last thing she needed was students fighting in the corridors.

"Goblins don't use betrothal contracts professor, and there were quite a few in the name of Harry Potter lying in Gringotts. My godfather, Lord Black, has respected my wishes and politely declined every single one of them. This was no slight on anyone, be it by blood status or anything else you care to think of. With no access to my vault, I don't even know what names had been put forward. I'm sorry if anyone is disappointed at that, but my best friend was in no way involved in this decision being made."

Cho felt humiliated and wanted some payback. "Granger destroyed my wand, what's going to be done about that?"

McGonagall looked to Hermione for an explanation, she duly obliged. "Miss Chang fired a cutting curse at me, I didn't want her firing another. As I said, it's also against the castle rules to use magic in the corridors - so I used my sword to disarm my attacker."

The concern in McGonagall's voice was clear to hear. "Are you hurt, Miss Granger, do you need to see Madam Pomfrey?"

"No professor, our extra defence lessons with Professor Weasley just kicked in. He really is a brilliant teacher."

"...but I saw my curse hit her, right across her chest..." It was only then it dawned on Cho that perhaps she shouldn't be saying anything. McGonagall dragged her and Marietta away, warning Hermione and Padma that Professor Flitwick would talk with them on this matter later.

It was only as the crowd dispersed that Sirius approached the trio. "Well done, you three, you handled that brilliantly. Hermione, I'm glad it was only your practice sword you used on me. Good tactical awareness, Padma, you had your wand out and Hermione's back covered. Sorry, Harry, but I should have foreseen this problem. Just because we explained our reasons to the fathers, that doesn't mean they are going to pass those reasons on to their daughters. Your explanation should be all round the castle by the morning..."

Sirius had underestimated how fast news travels in the castle, certainly quicker than Neville and Parvati as they 'ran' toward the group. "Looks like we missed it again, Parvati. I really need to get transferred to Ravenclaw, all this running is killing me."

Parvati was in her twin's arms, with no breath left for speaking. "Hey Pav, we're fine. That bitch Chang decided to make her play and Hermione owned her arse. She also sliced clean through Chang's wand, the other bit must be lying about here somewhere. You want it as a souvenir, Hermione?"

Harry currently had his arm around his best friend. Hermione had fought back and, for the first time she could remember, had actually

won. She didn't know what she was supposed to be feeling at the moment, Hermione was quite sure she shouldn't be shaking though.

"It's just the adrenalin leaving your system, you'll be fine in a few moments. Remember what happened to me? No, that was stupid, please forget all about what happened to me - we don't want to be visiting any toilets for that tonight."

This brought a slight smile to Hermione's face, which was Harry's aim. He really had no wish to see her throwing up in a toilet over this. "I am so proud of you for the way you handled that, my father will be ecstatic that you took her out using your sword. Your mum and dad will be over the moon too, I can see a few more Spider-Man comics heading in my direction over this."

Thinking of her parents, and how well Harry got on with them, put a genuine smile on Hermione's face. Looking at Neville leaning on the wall, he'd practically burst a gut to get here. Padma had her arm comfortingly around her twin, but her friend had stood beside her once more. The arm around her shoulders though was the most important. Harry not only gave her the confidence to deal with these situations, he provided the training and even supplied her sword. One glance at a grinning Sirius and Hermione knew she was going to be fine. With such a support group in place, how could she not be.

"I was already heading to Crawley to tell your mum and dad how your weekend went, wait until they hear this story..."

"No embellishing the story, Sirius. My mum and dad worry enough over me being here, they don't need to hear stories of their daughter wielding her trusty blade against hoards of attacking witches."

Sirius appeared crestfallen. "Aw, Hermione, please? You 'wielding your trusty blade against hoards of attacking witches' is just too good not to use. I could have Dan and Emma on the edge of their seats."

"Yeah, that's exactly what I'm afraid of. Them getting off those seats to drag their only daughter out of Hogwarts. Chang fired one curse, it was shielded before I sliced her wand in two."

"...but Hermione, where's the excitement, drama and tension in that?"



Padma was gradually getting used to the marauder, and comfortable enough to joke right back. "There was drama and tension enough for me, thank you very much. For excitement though, Harry taking nine of them down in as many seconds really takes a bit of beating."

A laughing Sirius reluctantly bade them a goodnight, until Harry asked what he had planned for the rest of the week. "I'm hoping to find an old friend..." Seeing his godson's concern at that remark, he quickly put his mind at rest. "No, not that one. Your father persuaded me to let the authorities deal with that, your father can be quite persuasive when he puts his mind to it."

Barchoke had actually sat him down for some straight talking, saying Harry needed him in his life. Pointing out that he'd let his godson down before may be true, but Sirius definitely thought that was a low blow. He accepted it though as he got to know the goblin better, this was a father who would do anything for his son. Since that son was his godson, how could Sirius possibly argue with that. Peter had cost him ten years with Harry, and any chance of raising his godson. That both Barchoke and Harry wanted the marauder as part of their lives was an unexpected and wonderful opportunity, an opportunity he had no intention of throwing away over chasing a rat.

-oOoOo-

The rat in question was currently rising from its cosy shelter, behind the brick wall that was part of a London Underground tunnel. Peter had excavated a nice little hide for himself, once he could ignore the sounds of the trains racing past. He was less than a hundred yards from Leicester Square underground station, and within a quarter of a mile of both Diagon Alley and the Ministry of Magic. Not that he wanted to go to any of those places, information though could be as vital as food.

There was no shortage of food available to him, not if you were prepared to rake through the bins. This was no problem to Peter, spending so long as a rodent had dulled what little piece of self-worth the wizard known as Peter Pettigrew had. Once he had dreams of grandeur and power, only for that power to be corrupted into him being forced to betray his friends. The former marauder had then surprised himself at how well his play had worked against Sirius.

While Black had spent a decade in Azkaban, he'd lived a life of relative luxury as a young boy's pet. Peter had even spent the last four and a half years living in the Gryffindor dorms, bringing back memories of happier and more innocent times. That all changed when Sirius Black had been freed from Azkaban, forcing Peter to flee his safe haven.

Only the involvement of Harry gave him time to escape. Had they plastered all over the front of the Prophet that he was a rat animagus, Peter doubted if he could have made it out of The Burrow. What was that news though in comparison to the boy-who-lived holding a sword to Dumbledore?

Peter thought he was safe for the moment, how long that would last was anyone's guess. He was a thirty year old wizard who'd now spent a third of his life living as a rat, and who knew how much longer that would have to continue. The dark mark that was burned into his arm all those decades ago changed his life forever, and not for the better.

A/N thanks for reading

A/N-2 I would like to dedicate this chapter to one of my readers. This young lady spent her flights to and from the U.K. reading a number of my stories. That she lives in Australia gives you some idea of what a marathon feat this was. A personal 'thanks for reading' to Ropeter from me.

Robert

## Chapter 25

Harry's declaration regarding his betrothal contracts actually made it into the Prophet. Instead of buying him breathing space though, every witch in Hogwarts took this as an invitation that the boy-who-lived was still there for the taking. Not quite the effect he was hoping for.

The lessons with Sirius were paying dividends too, unexpected ones. Harry could now see that his actions had painted a large target on Hermione's forehead with the other witches in the castle. His task now was damage limitation, while standing squarely beside his best friend. A part of him hated that he'd caused Hermione all this trouble, a much greater part couldn't imagine a life without his wonderful best friend in it.

Now he had to walk the tightrope between making Hermione's Valentine's day special, and not heaping more scorn on her from the other witches. Harry was coming to rely on his godfather's advice more and more, something that pleased both of them.

Hermione's takedown of Cho had won her deserved respect across the castle, as had her attitude afterwards. Hermione had taken the view that Cho was understandably upset at her betrothal refusal, the second year had reacted without thinking - and also out of character. Giving Cho the benefit of the doubt saw Hermione claim the moral high ground, leaving her opponent with no other option than to apologise. After Professor Flitwick had investigated the matter by speaking with all four witches involved, Cho found herself in detention for a month while Marietta merely lost house points for initial poor judgement.

News that Harry would be spending his summer hopping around the world, along with his invited friends, was soon common knowledge. Parvati would obviously tell her best friend, and Lavender would obviously tell the entire castle. That Miss Hobson was also rumoured to be attending at some point over the summer saw Harry face an almost constant barrage of witches and wizards wrangling for invites. Spending some of the summer with the Weasley twins or Roger Davies might be appealing but, by and large, Harry was really glad he'd locked the numbers where they were.

Ravenclaw house had soon buckled back down to studying after the holiday, though Penny almost unintentionally started a riot. Percy had OWL's this year and, citing the poor teaching on offer at Hogwarts, had asked his elder brother for some defence tuition for him and his girlfriend. Penny getting extra defence tuition, from the same teacher the first years raved about, saw Bill Weasley inundated with requests to join these classes.

This saw Bill approach Minerva about the possibility of running an OWL revision defence class on a Sunday afternoon, only to be asked if he could do the same for NEWT level students on a Saturday too! Bill had to get back to Gringotts about that.

Barchoke was looking for a favour from Minerva, so was delighted to have this carrot to dangle in front of her. There was also the added bonus of even more Gringotts influence inside Hogwarts castle to be considered, something that would surely get right up Dumbledore's crooked nose.

Since the favour Barchoke requested was permitted under Hogwarts rules, providing the proper forms were completed, Minerva was delighted to comply. The notices of extra OWL and NEWT defence tuition would be posted in the common rooms before the end of the day, she expected there would be a large uptake. Minerva couldn't remember when things had run this well inside Hogwarts, nor when the students had gotten a better education. The goblin influences in history, potions and defence were certainly having a positive effect on the castle, even the Weasley twins were often observed studying that wonderful potions book Master Pitslay provided.

-oOoOo-

The Minister of Magic could hardly contain his excitement while waiting on the department head he'd just summoned. Cornelius had been lying in the bath last night when his eureka moment struck, and he didn't even wet the floor. The ministry needed a way to officially contact the goblins, a way that he would be able to justify to the Wizengamot - and he may just have found it.

He, Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic, solving problems - this was exhilarating! Why did he ever listen to people like Malfoy or Dumbledore in the first place?

A knock at the door brought the man he wanted to talk with into his office. "Come in, Arthur, take a seat. There is something I'd like to run past you, though I must emphasise this needs to remain top secret at the moment."

Arthur Weasley could only nod in agreement, having no idea what Fudge was up to.

"The whole Crouch / Black matter was only solved by the goblins passing messages onto Amelia's niece through young Harry. I think we would both agree that's a pretty unsatisfactory method of communication between governments. What I'm proposing will see your department abolished..."

Arthur's heart sank at that, how was he supposed to go home and tell his little girl she couldn't go to Hogwarts now...

"...and replaced with one which handles all our liaisons with both the muggles and the goblins. I have you earmarked to head this new department, but only if we can pull this off."

Arthur felt as if he was on an out of control broom. He'd just corkscrewed to the depths of despair before racing to the dizzy heights of a possible promotion, of course there had to be a catch. "Minister, I could hardly be considered a goblin expert."

"You know as much about goblins as I do, but you have an amazing resource at your disposal that I don't. Your eldest son not only works for Gringotts, he's a personal tutor of Harry's at Hogwarts."

"Minister, my son takes his work for the goblins very seriously. The chances of him passing on any information are nil."

"Very admirable of him Arthur, and exactly what we're after. The ministry aren't looking for goblin secrets to be exposed, rather that a dialog between us can hopefully be established. Both of us know how difficult this could be to get past the Wizengamot, it would be political suicide if the goblins weren't on board first. I need your son to pass this general idea to the goblins and discover what they think about it. Unless we get positive feedback, this conversation never happened and the matter ends here."

Having Bill sound the goblins out on this idea was something Arthur approved of, he also understood the minister's stance on saying nothing just now. To push this through the Wizengamot, only for the goblins to then reject it, would end the careers of everyone involved in this new measure.

"I hope we can count on your son's discretion to act as a go-between, the ministry and the goblins need to agree on this deal before we go anywhere near the chamber with new legislation. This could be potentially a massive step for both leaderships. Well, what do you think Arthur?"

The more Arthur thought about it, the more excited he became. "I think it's a brilliant idea, minister."

"I would like to have at least the framework in place by summer. If we can invite Centurion Crow to the Ministry Summer Ball, the Wizengamot would then face public pressured to vote in favour of these new measures."

Arthur left the minister's office with his head spinning, not least because it was Cornelius Fudge who'd come up with this idea. He needed to contact Bill at once.

-oOoOo-

Hermione was a bundle of nerves this morning, she didn't know what was going to happen - and that always worried her. It wasn't as if Hermione was an expert on Valentine's Day, she'd never received a card in her life. She was hoping for one today though, but understood that Harry being a goblin might scupper that actually happening. Hermione would certainly not stoop to dropping any hints.

Having Harry at her side for the day was more than enough for Hermione, but she knew every witch in the castle would be casting their eyes in her direction today. She had of course gotten Harry a card, but even that presented a dilemma. What if she gave him the card and he hadn't gotten one for her? It wouldn't be much of a Valentine's Day if Harry spent it berating himself for not getting her a card.

Harry solved all her problems the moment they met.

Giving Hermione a hug, followed by a kiss on the cheek was a good start. "Happy Valentine's Day, Hermione. Would you do me the honour of spending the evening with me?"

This left Hermione a very relieved but now puzzled witch. "Don't I spend every evening with you?"

"Ah, but not like this." Harry's mischievous smile would melt hearts of stone. "So, do we have a date?"

The use of the d-word had Hermione's head in a spin, she quickly agreed to anything before they headed off to exercise.

Hermione handed Harry his card before they went down to breakfast, and emulated his hug / kiss combination from earlier. It was only when she stepped back that Hermione noticed the beautiful yellow rose that was now pinned to her robes.

"How...when..."

"Magic, Hermione, simply magic."

Hermione sat at breakfast with her rose pinned to her robes and a permanent smile on her lips, much to the indignation of Padma. "How can you sit there grinning like an idiot with that happening beside you?"

Glancing to her other side revealed a long line of owls delivering cards and presents to Harry, causing Hermione to shrug her shoulders. "I've already given Harry my card, and he's taking me on a date tonight."

"DATE?"

Padma could have bitten her tongue off for saying that too loud, but Hermione didn't seem to mind. She just nodded her head in conformation while her smile got wider. This would be enough to start tongues wagging, and that information would be all over the castle by the time breakfast finished.

On Hermione's other side, Harry was amassing quite the collection of cards and chocolates.

"Someone's very popular today, looks like Honeydukes has been cleaned out."

"Help yourself, Roger, I'm not really a fan of chocolate. Why don't you start passing them around the table, let everyone enjoy them."

This proved to be a popular decision as many hands made light work of Harry's haul. Padma had helped herself to a couple of chocolate frogs when a warning look from the boy they were sent to saw the amphibian modelled confectionary disappear into her bag. The warning bell rang and it was time to head to potions, Harry's glance led Padma to believe they might be testing chocolate today.

They were less than halfway through their potions lesson when the class was interrupted by a delegation, McGonagall, Flitwick and Dumbledore all appeared concerned. It was Filius who took the lead. "Excuse this intrusion, Master Pitslay, we needed to check on your students. Ravenclaws all over the castle have been acting peculiar, our first years though seem curiously unaffected."

"Could I have a bit more detail than 'peculiar', Master Flitwick, it doesn't give us much to go on."

Filius knew what reaction this news would bring, he still needed to say it though. "It would seem a number of my house have been affected by potions, potions that affect their emotions. We suspected some of the chocolates Centurion Crow received may have been tainted, but the entire first year uninfected would appear to dispute that. Almost all the first years were seen to help themselves to the free sweets..."

Filius stopped because Padma placed her chocolate frogs on the bench, closely followed by Mandy, Morag, Terry, Michael and Anthony doing the same with their hoards of free chocolate. Hermione felt she needed to justify her lack of confectionary. "My parents are dentists, we don't eat chocolate in our house." She didn't want to admit there were other things running through her mind while everyone else was helping themselves, namely her 'date' with Harry.



Mandy 'broke' next. "I saw Harry give Padma a warning look, she then put her chocolate in her bag. That was good enough for me so I did the same, and then told Morag."

The little Scot quickly volunteered that she'd passed the exact same advice onto the boys, though no one else was willing to take notice of her concerns.

Terry spoke for all the first years. "If Harry's being cautious about something, that's good enough for me. I could always eat them later."

This left Minerva to ask the question Harry had known would be coming from the moment they entered the potions class. "If you suspected something, Mr Crow, why didn't you say so?"

"This morning I received fourteen separate gifts of sweets, the odds of at least one of them being tampered with were good. What was I supposed to do, professor? You witnessed what happened over the betrothal refusal, don't you think it would have been worse if I started having the gifts tested to see if I wasn't being slipped a potion? Duels have been fought over far less insulting behaviour than that. The staff must have seen all those deliveries, did it occur to any of you to check there was nothing harmful amongst it?"

None of the three could answer that, though Dumbledore of course had something to say. "If you suspected in the least, you should not have let your housemates eat tainted chocolates. Supposing there was poison in some of those sweets?"

"I assume there are wards in place to prevent that? It is after all your job to keep us safe, not mine. You were in the hall and did nothing, do not come in here blaming me for your mistakes. I also assume the DMLE has been contacted?"

Dumbledore was once more on the defensive. "For a school prank, don't be ridiculous. When the people who did this are found, they shall be punished with detentions and lost house points."

This led Harry to shake his head in disappointment. "Master Pitslay, what is the penalty for even attempting to poison a goblin with a love potion?"

"Beheading!" it was an enraged potions master who provided even more information. "No one has ever been stupid enough to attempt poisoning a centurion with that filth, I would imagine their punishment would be even more severe."

Minerva had her hand protectively at her throat. "How do you get more severe than having your head removed?"

It was Harry who gave her the answer. "It depends who or what is doing the removing. A goblin blade would be clean and quick, a dragon might decide to chew on you a bit first. Are you going to contact the aurors, Headmaster, or shall we do this the goblin way? Once the process of goblin justice has been started, it can't be stopped until it reaches its conclusion."

The goblin potions master was already halving all the chocolate, meticulously labelling and bottling each sample. "I will leave a set that can be examined by your own potions master, though I would expect the perpetrators of this to be easy to find. All we need look for are the witches being pursued by love-sick Ravenclaws."

"That would not necessarily be a marker of their guilt. As I mentioned before, we can't discount this being a prank."

Harry removed some cards from his bag and began writing in the corner. "These are the cards that came with the sweets. I've marked in the bottom corner what chocolate came with that card, the handwriting might match the girl who I was supposed to fall for."

It was then his head of house broke the bad news. "We think at least three separate girls were involved, there have been fights breaking out around the castle as suitors fought for their new love's attention. Classes have been canceled for the rest of the day to allow the staff to deal with the situation, Professor Snape is currently brewing flushing potions for those affected - not all of them are wizards."

Harry immediately focused on McGonagall. "Does this mean we can leave early? I think I really need to talk to my father about this."

"We plan to make an announcement at lunch, you're free after that." She then immediately turned her attention to the Headmaster, preempting his objection. "All the relevant parchment has been completed, Headmaster, and this is within my remit."

Master Pitslay handed Dumbledore a bag containing half the samples. "I would advise you to get your aurors here as soon as possible. If these samples result in a positive test, Barchoke will demand justice on those who attempted to poison his son. Students, I shall see you next week, assuming Centurion Crow is still attending Hogwarts."

The three members of the senior staff accompanied the class back to the great hall, where bewildered students were milling about, wondering just what was going on. As Dumbledore left to contact the DMLE, it was McGonagall who took to the podium. She was greeted by silence as everyone wanted to know if the rumours were true.

"Students, it would seem some amongst you took the spirit of Valentine's Day to an unacceptable level. We are currently having samples of chocolate analysed for the presence of love potions, and the headmaster is contacting the DMLE. There are some students already in the infirmary, and classes have been cancelled for the rest of the day to allow the staff to investigate this very serious matter."

Normally, any announcement about cancelled classes would be greeted by cheering, not this time. Total, stunned silence. A silence that was broken by a single voice.

"Professor, can I say something?"

Harry was standing on the Ravenclaw bench, and asking for permission to speak. Minerva gave him that permission.

"It looks like some of the sweets I was sent today may have had some form of love potions in them. Fortunately, I didn't eat any. If I had, the people who sent them would be facing goblin justice. For this crime, a guilty verdict carries a death penalty. Since this information wasn't known, and I didn't eat any of the sweets, the DMLE will deal with the incident - this time. Oh, that law also applies to friends of the goblin nation."

This was also greeted with silence as Harry sat back down. McGonagall thought there was one more thing she needed to add. "One of the most important lessons you will learn while growing up is that our actions can have consequences. This may be a prank that

went horribly wrong or something more sinister, either way - there will be consequences. It's only how serious those consequences are that have still to be determined. Ingesting multiple love potions can prove fatal as they compete for dominance inside the victim's body. Thankfully, it would appear we have been spared that terrible fate this time."

Lunch appeared on the table but there didn't seem to be much appetite for it, only Ron Weasley was eating with his usual gusto. Harry took Hermione's hand and led her out the hall, pausing only to let their friends know they would see them later.

"I'm sorry Hermione, this is not the day I had planned for you. Can you grab a dress, and whatever you need to go with it? We can get ready at my place later. I need to get to my father before he explodes..."

"No problem Harry, but why the serious rush? You didn't eat any of the chocolate and are perfectly fine, or am I missing something here?"

"You know goblins only have one mate, and that mate is for life." Hermione was nodding at this but still missing the point.

"Can you imagine how a society with those beliefs would react to a potion that could cause goblins to break sacred bonds. Nothing is hated in the nation as much as these potions, except perhaps those who would use them. This is an aspect of Valentine's Day Sirius didn't mention to me."

"So you didn't know your sweets had those potions in them?"

"Hermione, only a fool would eat something when you didn't know who sent it. To then test the gift would be a great insult. I suspected they might be pranked, nothing like this though. Oh, I'd better warn you - my father can be quite scary when he's really mad. What you need to remember though is he's not mad at us."

This drew a smile from the girl. "Don't worry Harry, my mum and dad can be the same. So, where are we going tonight?"

-oOoOo-

Harry's father was currently in a meeting with the director, a meeting Ragnok appeared to be enjoying. "So Barchoke, it would appear your ploy has not only borne fruit, it's providing us with a whole orchard."

He tried to insert a note of caution. "We're still far from equals though. Placing goblins on a par with muggles is not such a step-up in the eyes of a lot of purebloods, they think muggles are little more than beasts too."

"That may be true, and probably why the minister thinks he can get this passed through the Wizengamot. If he tries for too much in the one bite, both he and his policy will be thrown out. We need to tweak this policy so that it reaches a level that I can then take to the nation, without causing a revolt. Neither side were ever going to get all they wanted, what we need here is a middle ground that we can both accept - and sell to our subjects."

Barchoke was also worried about the timescale involved here. "Negotiations like this usually take years. This will alter treaties and laws, is it feasible to even consider the timescale the minister is hinting at?"

The director couldn't help but let his grin show through. "That all depends on whether the right people can be put in position, and what form these negotiations take. I intend to suggest Weasley as the ministry representative meets directly with a member of the nation. An ambassador, if you will."

Looking at the director's grin actually widening, Barchoke had a bad feeling about this. "That sounds fine, did you have someone in mind?"

The grin had become a chuckle. "Why Ambassador Barchoke, can't you guess?"

"Director, I am already very busy..."

"I am just about to change that. Apart from the Potter account, all others will go to account managers of your choice - no more than one per manager though. I see your new duties taking up all your time for the next six years."

That number was hugely significant but Barchoke wanted to ensure he was reading the correct interpretation into this clue. "Director, why six years?"

"By then you should be able to fulfil a goblin's lifelong ambition, and hand your duties over to your son. Ambassador Lord Harry James Potter has quite the ring to it, don't you think? He would represent the nation, yet be respected in both worlds - if his father can pull this off."

Barchoke was now kneeling before his leader in respect, he had no words to say what this represented for him, and his son.

"Weasley has our curse-breaker to rely on for information about us, make sure he knows to comply with his father's wishes. You have your own son, off learning the ways of wizards. You also have Miss Granger, Friend to the Nation and an invaluable source for all things muggle. I can't think of the last time I felt so positive about the future of our nation."

The kneeling goblin finally found his voice. "Director, you have my vow that this venture will not fail due to any lack of effort or guile on my part. As you yourself said, this would see me fulfil an ambition I thought was merely an impossible dream."

"I know my friend, and it would be well deserved. Let's keep your supposed successor's identity a secret for now, we can let it slip to Weasley if the negotiations falter. I'm hoping to keep that news to ourselves, and use it to wring more concessions out them later. With the prospect of their boy-who-lived accepting his lordship, your son shall be our ace in the hole once more."

"What of my son, can I tell him? I don't like keeping secrets that concern him."

"This is not a secret, yet. Until you become Ambassador, there is no secret to keep. Once you have achieved that feat, you may of course tell your son. As he gets older, he will need different training to cope with this new role we both want for him. I am delighted you have already started his tuition with Lord Black. Between that, Hogwarts and his involvement with the Grangers, our young centurion should have a good grounding to undertake this most difficult of roles."

Barchoke could agree to that. Until the deal was done, there was no job for Harry to aim for. "What of the dark one?"

"His disposal still remains one of our nation's top priorities. We cannot put our lives on hold however, waiting on him gracing us with an appearance. You have my promise that when he does, everything we have will stand beside your son in his efforts to finish this once and for all. We want a respectful peace between our nation and all others, he will destroy peace and everyone who doesn't bow before him. The dark one must be destroyed for all our sakes."

-oOoOo-

It was a relieved Harry who discovered his father in an incredibly good mood, he almost hated spoiling it with his news. Harry also discovered just how powerful that charm of Rowena Ravenclaw's really was, Hermione blushing like a beetroot at his father's string of obscenities indicated she still understood the goblin language.

"Father! Hermione probably doesn't know what a Clabbert is, far less that it has a pustle that should be transferred to these witches."

This allowed an enraged Barchoke to regain control, that was no language to use in front of a young female. "I apologise, Hermione, I hope my son has explained why we despise these potions so much?"

"Yes sir. Had I been forced to watch Harry kissing one of those witches, I would probably have agreed with your hag comment too."

Harry tried to get his point across. "Madam Bones will deal with it, you told me yourself she was a fair-minded witch. Sirius can handle anything else that comes up over this. The whole school now knows our views on these potions, let them deal with it this time."

His father also knew the incident would give them a little more leverage in their dealings with the ministry, something like this would not remain out of the Prophet. "Very well, but there will be a condition. If this is just the actions of some silly witches, the ministry can deal with it. If we find others behind this, Gringotts may take action against those individuals. Publicly locking down the Malfoy vaults made a lot of purebloods sit up and take notice, locking down

a vault would be the minimum punishment for attempting to use one of these potions on a centurion."

Knowing this was as good as he was going to get, and better than he had hoped for, Harry quickly conceded that condition. Now all he had to do was contact Sirius about their change in plans.

-oOoOo-

Hermione was sitting staring at the mirror, and wishing her mum was here. She had applied some makeup to her face in an attempted to highlight her eyes, the effect was rather panda-esque. The knock at her bedroom door saw the last person Hermione expected entering, and they were dressed as if for a date too.

"Professor Hobson, what are you doing here?"

This drew a smile from the blonde witch. "Hermione, when we're outside Hogwarts - it's Henrika. Did you really think we were going to let a couple of first years loose for an evening in London?"

"You're coming too? Oh, this is great. Do you know where we're going, Harry won't say."

"Must run in the family, his godfather wouldn't tell me either. All I know is that it involves dinner and dancing, and we had to pop here to pick you both up. Can I help you get ready?"

Hermione was extremely grateful for the offer, and quickly accepted. She trusted Henrika not to steer her wrong.

"Too many young girls just can't wait to grow up. It's you Harry's asked on a date tonight, not someone you think you need to be." Henrika's wand left Hermione's face free of make-up, and her complexion glowing with health. "I can use a veela spell to help you though..."

Hermione watched in utter amazement as her frizz was slowly replaced by soft curls. "You have got to teach me that!"

"...and you have got to get moving, I left some nervous wizards to come and get you."



Hermione watched Harry's face light up as she entered the room, she was concentrating on that so much, the well-known voice surprised her.

"Doesn't even look at us, Neville, probably never even noticed we were here!"

"Padma, Neville - what are you doing here?"

"Well, since Mr Longbottom asked me to spend the evening with him, I said yes. Neville gave me a card and asked just after you two left."

"Oh, this is brilliant! Do you have any idea where we're going?"

Harry was right by her side. "Now Hermione, why would you want to spoil the surprise. It's time to go anyway."

The three couples caused quite a stir as they left Gringotts to head for the Leaky Cauldron. Hermione was reminding herself that the Cauldron didn't do dancing, but was still relieved to discover they were merely passing through. The limo sitting outside couldn't have been for anyone else. Harry opened the door for her as the surprises just kept coming. She found herself engulfed in some very familiar arms.

"Mum, dad, you too?" Hermione was now looking forward to her night even more.

There was barely time to bring everyone up to speed on what had been discovered at Hogwarts. Two fourth year girls had done it purely as a prank, both only wanted a kiss from the boy-who-lived on Valentine's Day. They received a week's suspension from Hogwarts, were put on probation for a year and then escorted home by aurors. Both girls were mortified at the trouble they had caused, and the trouble they were now in. A third year Slytherin had received a package from home, a package she was told to send to Harry. The aurors were currently visiting her parents.

The limo soon dropped them at their destination, the Thames Embankment, just along from the Houses of Parliament. All the ladies were delighted with their surprise, a dinner / dance cruise along the Thames.

They were soon shown to their table, a table that had a fabulous view of London by night.

Even Dan and Emma were impressed. "This is wonderful, Sirius, how did you think of it? I didn't know you were so well up on our world."

"I'm actually not, Emma, I just remembered something from many years ago. James and Lily did this one Halloween, it was getting too dangerous to go out and celebrate in our world at the time. Come to think of it, I'm sure we celebrated Harry's birth nine months later."

Sirius' attempt at embarrassing his godson failed miserably, no one minded though after witnessing the result. The expression on Harry's face was one of wonder and amazement.

"My mum and dad did this? Maybe even sat on this very boat..."

His friends and family got to see Harry with all his defences down, Emma though this was the first time she had seen this side of the lad. The mother also couldn't fail to notice that her daughter was, if anything, even closer to her best friend. When Sirius had approached them with this idea for Valentine's Day, they had both quickly agreed. Dan may think his little princess was too young to be even thinking about a 'date', the fact that he was going to see Hermione again quashed any argument before it got started.

After a lovely meal, the band had barely begun playing when Harry asked Hermione to dance. Padma and Neville were soon following them onto the dance floor as Dan slipped his arm around his wife.

"I just can't get over how confident she looks, or how well they fit together. Sirius, Henrika, you've done a wonderful job in such a short space of time."

The young professor may be having to keep her veela allure as screwed down as tight as she could, but Henrika was still enjoying herself. "It's an absolute pleasure to teach such willing pupils. I sometimes help Bill with their defence lessons too. Harry is an extremely motivated young man, and his friends have a fierce determination to keep up with him. I think your daughter fears being left behind, even in the short time I've known them I feel confident in saying that will never happen."

Watching as the young couple waltzed around the dance floor, it was hard to refute that claim.

Hermione held her birthday on the astronomy tower as the most romantic event in her life, that would have to be changed. Dancing in Harry's arms on a ship sailing down the Thames on Valentine's Day was simply unbelievable. She had hoped for a card, and Harry had made her feel like a princess.

"So, do you like your surprise?"

"Oh Harry, I absolutely love it! Thank you so much."

"Well, this is just the first part of it. We're all staying at your house for the weekend, give your mum and dad a chance to see our lessons too. Curse-breaker Weasley will come to your house in the morning, and you'll need to add a certain history professor to the ward access. Professor Hobson will be there in the afternoon, I think Sirius and her are getting quite close."

Hermione's eyes now glistened with unshed tears, that these were happy tears was never in doubt. She had something that was bothering her though, and for once just blurted it out. "Why are you so good to me, Harry?"

This drew a smile and an easy answer from the boy in question. "...because you're my best friend."

That earned Harry a rather chaste peck on the lips, leaving both of them happily blushing.

Henrika was again having the unusual experience of dancing with someone and not having their full attention. At least this time she was sure it was not through lack of interest on her dance partner's part.

"Harry's fine, Sirius. If anything, it should be Dan Granger keeping his eye on them."

"I just want the night to be perfect for them. I wasn't around when he was younger and then, first thing he asks me to do when I'm back, Hermione gets jumped in the corridor."

"Sirius, please listen to me. Harry will love his godfather tomorrow, no matter what - just as you will him. That's the way these things work. A few days out of the castle will probably suit them down to the ground, given what happened in Hogwarts today. Now, I thought this was a date - or did you lure me here under false pretences?"

Sirius realised this woman deserved nothing less than his full attention. "Oh this is most certainly a date, Miss Hobson, a date I have been looking forward to."

A/N thanks for reading

## Chapter 26

Dan Granger was practically shitting himself with fright, he hardly noticed that his wife's fingers were almost touching bone as Emma gripped his arm for support. They were both standing there watching their only daughter fighting for her life, at least that's what it looked like to them.

Bill and Harry had set down some special stones that would stop any magic escaping and both parents had been excited to see the kids training - that excitement soon turned to terror. The tickling hex Hermione had used on Dan had in no way prepared the young witch's muggle parents for magical displays of this nature.

Three of them were currently attacking Harry, who strangely appeared to be holding his own. When a red beam of light managed to hit Neville and drop him to the ground, Emma's scream was loud and piercing.

This caught Hermione's attention, and Harry used the distraction to put her out the fight too. Padma didn't last long after that.

Only after Harry began reviving his downed friends did the parents recover their power of thought and speech. "What the hell was that?"

Dan's question / demand was fired off as powerfully as any curse, and targeted directly at Bill.

"Twice a week, these four take their normal defence lessons with their friends. At the weekend, I'm training Harry so he can hopefully survive a fight with Voldemort or his death eaters. The other three wanted to be part of those lessons and are plugging on gamely. Harry buying them duelling robes has enabled us to step-up the severity of curses quite a bit, though all three were just hit on unprotected parts of their bodies by stunners. A stunner will put you out of a fight until someone applies the counter curse, or it will eventually wear off."

By this point they had been joined by the four kids, Emma was hugging and inspecting Hermione for damage at the same time.

"Mum, I'm fine. We do this every week, what did you think 'extra defence training' was?"

Bill wanted his lesson back on track. "Okay, where did we go wrong?"

"We weren't fighting on a flat floor, I stumbled and Harry nailed me."

"Good point Neville, we'll work on that next week. I'm sure the room could provide us with different terrains. Next?"

Hermione had her head down, "Mum's scream distracted me, that was all Harry needed."

Bill had drummed into them that they needed to be honest here, it was vital that they learned from their mistakes. Padma was certainly honest in her assessment of what happened next. "I just couldn't handle Harry on my own, and he certainly never gave me a chance to revive any of these two."

This received an understanding nod from their tutor, "Anything to add Harry?"

"They're still sticking together too much, playing safety in numbers. Neville mentioned terrain yet none of them used it. Anyone getting behind that tree would have been murder to take out."

"All good points. Remember, the best way not to be hit is not to be there. Hiding behind a solid object would certainly be high on the list too. Now, let's practice our shield drills."

There was no grumpiness or moaning as they split into two pairs, with one shielding while the other fired curses at it. They then swapped when it was their partner's turn to shield.

Bill had a very concerned father on his hands. "This looks like combat training, I don't know that I'm happy about my daughter learning this."

"As I said Dan, my remit from Gringotts is to train Harry. The other three specifically asked to be involved. I know I'm pushing them but again, that's my job here. If you want Hermione out of these lessons

then there's nothing I can do about that. One thing's for sure though, you get to tell her."

While every bit as concerned as her husband, Emma wasn't certain if they should go that far. "Can you give us some idea of what level the kids are at? This is all new to us and it may not be as dangerous as it looks to the uninitiated."

That was a fair question, one that Bill had to put a bit of thought into answering. "They've been getting at least an extra six hours of defence tuition every weekend for about six months now. We're not working through text books or doing any written work at all. Their time is spent purely on the practical application of defence. In terms of magically duelling, I would put them ahead of my twin brothers - and they're in third year."

This shocked Emma, "They're really that far ahead?"

"In the practical side, yes. I really have to wait until they are a bit older before teaching them more powerful spells. This is more about building up their magical power levels until they get older, these shield drills help with that. None of the other first years can cast a shield, or a stunner."

This actually made sense to both parents. "Can I assume that's why you're trying to instil tactical awareness into them now? So that as they mature, they will already have that in their minds."

"To be honest, Dan, Harry's been raised to be tactically aware. It's something he does now without thinking. It will take a few years to get the others anywhere near that level but they're already far ahead of their peers."

He then stopped the drills before they started flagging, it was now time for some fun. "Okay, take five while I set up some target practice. Let's see if we can knock the reigning champion off his lofty perch."

Bill then removed what appeared at first to be a couple of dolls from his bag, only for them to grow to about five foot in height. These manikins were then animated to quickly but randomly move around the garden.

The kids held a quick rock - paper - scissors tournament to decide the order they would compete in, Padma was up first.

When Bill gave the command to start, she began unleashing curses at the pair of targets. With her three friends shouting encouragement, Padma had soon completed the task. Bill was explaining to the Grangers just what was happening here.

"These training dummies will move randomly until they receive five spell hits, they will then stop for ten seconds. They have to get both dummies stopped at the same time to complete their task. This teaches accuracy, speed of casting and also awareness. They need to know how many times they've hit each target, otherwise the first dummy could be moving before they've got the second one stopped. Well done, Padma, you just broke the two minute barrier."

This saw the delighted witch being congratulated by her friends, it was now Harry's turn.

When the call came to begin, Harry's hand was a blur as his knife seemed to appear from nowhere and began spitting out curses. Dan now understood both boy's being quite underwhelmed that day at his shooting club, a rather unusual reaction to having a gun in your hand for the first time. Compared to this though, it was no wonder the small paper targets neither excited nor grabbed Harry and Neville's attention. Dan didn't need to hear a time to know that Harry had completed the task quicker than Padma, what he did next though surprised the hell out of him.

Harry's knife disappeared as his sword was drawn. Knowing he had only a few seconds before they reanimated, Harry gave it his best effort. A web shot out of his sword and captured the two manikins, but that wasn't the end of the matter. His sword directed the webbing to the tree and the dummies were hanging suspended by webbing from one of its lower branches. Having been attempting this since Christmas, Harry gave out a loud victory whoop of delight.

This left Emma shaking her head. "...and that is why you shouldn't give a young boy who can perform magic Spider-Man comics."

His tutor though was very impressed. "That is a very effective way of putting someone out a fight, Harry. If you can hang them high enough, then anyone releasing the prisoners will also have to catch



them before they hit the ground. Otherwise, they could be permanently out the fight."

The shooter in Dan saw him coming at this from a different angle. "Why did you use your sword? It took precious seconds to swap from your knife."

A happy Harry was being congratulated by his friends. Hermione had watched him practice that spell every morning in their training, this was the first time he'd pulled it off. Dan's question made him stop and think. "I have a lot more power when I cast with my sword, but I lose some of my speed of casting."

This was roughly what Dan expected Harry's answer to be. "Your knife is a pistol while the sword is a rifle, can you cast further with your sword?"

Hermione understood at once what her father was alluding to, but none of the other wizards, witch or goblin there had a clue what Dan was talking about. "A rifle is a much bigger gun than the pistols you and Neville would have used. It not only carries a lot more power but has a far greater range. If your sword acts the same way, you could put someone down before they got close enough to use their wand on you."

Their tutor could also see the benefit of that but again needed to get his lesson back on track. "That's something that will need to wait until you're back at Hogwarts to discover, trying it here would take us outside the wards. Can I have my dummies back please? Neville is up next."

He also broke two minutes before a rather nervous Hermione was ready to go. She needed to show her parents that these lessons were a great benefit to their daughter. Her fencing lessons were improving her reflexes and her hand / eye coordination, this was reflected in her display.

Again Dan didn't need a stopwatch to know Hermione was faster than both Padma and Neville, Harry hoisting her up in the air was a big clue that this might actually be her fastest ever. He'd told that arse Dursley that any of the kids could have made mincemeat out of Dudley's gang, his daughter had just proven beyond doubt to her father that she actually could. This was a proud moment for Dan,

one that made up for the terror he felt earlier. They'd just been given a demonstration of how much these lessons were helping Hermione, they would be foolish to stop them now. The fact that Dan didn't have to tell Hermione that her father was stopping these lessons played no part in his decision, or so he told himself.

-oOoOo-

Nothing had prepared Vernon for the terror he was currently feeling. Waking up to the sound of your wife screaming and the distant wail of sirens getting closer was not how he imagined his Saturday morning kicking off when going to bed last night. Then again, last night his bedroom had four walls - it currently had only three. It was hard to tell from where he and Petunia were now pressed for safety against the back wall of their bedroom, but it appeared as if the Dursleys home had acquired a vertical mine shaft where the front garden used to be.

That same mine shaft also appeared to have swallowed the front wall of the house, thank goodness Dudley's bedroom was at the back. Their driveway was gone too, as was their car that Vernon had proudly parked there yesterday. The 'For Sale' sign with the red 'SOLD' sticker was still prominently standing in a small untouched corner of their property, it's wooden post anchored into the only patch of front garden they had left. This sign though accounted for a good proportion of Vernon's terror.

Without any question, the proposed sale of their house would immediately fall into an even deeper black hole than the one currently in front of them - as would their move to a new home. There was also little doubt in Vernon's mind that their various insurance policies wouldn't cover this catastrophe, just like there would be no records of any mine shafts ever existing in this area.

The insurance companies would shrug their shoulders and put it down to an act of god, Vernon knew better. This was no act of god, more likely an act of goblins - an act that could financially ruin the Dursleys.

-oOoOo-

Emma had lunch ready but Bill found himself having to expand the Grangers' dining room table to accommodate everyone who was

going to be eating there. Barchoke had arrived with Sirius and Henrika, making ten for lunch. Bill was also staying since Minerva had sent him an owl cancelling this weekend's extra defence tutorials. With eleven Ravenclaws having to spend the night in the infirmary, the Deputy Headmistress really had no other choice. This though would save Bill a trip back to Gringotts, he needed to discover what information about this incident Barchoke wanted him to pass on to his father.

The curse-breaker managed to keep his smile in place when talking with Sirius, even though the wizard now had Henrika by his side. Bill felt like cursing himself for having a clear opportunity with the beautiful witch but had pondered and deliberated with himself about making any move in that direction, it would seem Sirius wasn't suffering from the same problem.

He had to be philosophical about the situation though, the timing wasn't right for him. He'd just been handed what Bill considered to be easily the most important task of his life, only to then meet the most beautiful witch he'd ever laid eyes on. That Gringotts had then given him another task that was as equally important as the first, and concerned his family too, left Bill thinking this was probably for the best. Henrika Hobson was a witch who would demand the full attention of any prospective suitor, and he simply wasn't in a position to give that amount of attention to anyone at the moment. The next few years of his life could help redefine the future of magical Britain, what was a possible romance in comparison to that.

This outlook may have helped him deal with the current situation, it didn't stop Bill silently promising himself that next time he wouldn't hold back. The only problem he could foresee with that promise was where to find another witch like Henrika Hobson?

Barchoke had seized the chance to have lunch with Harry and his friends. This also gave him the opportunity to bring everyone up to speed with exactly what was happening, and let Curse-breaker Weasley know this information was safe to pass on to his father.

"My sources are keeping me well informed about this situation, apparently the minister exploded when he heard the news. He and Madam Bones are heading to Hogwarts today, probably another reason those extra defence lessons were cancelled." The wily goblin

had no intention of mentioning that Amelia Bones had actually sent him an owl with all the pertinent information to this case. Since it was his son that was the supposed victim, Amelia had decided to treat Barchoke the same as any other parent with a child at Hogwarts. This more than anything convinced the goblin he was right to listen to Harry and let the ministry deal with the matter.

"The aurors reported that both sets of parents promised further retribution to their daughters, each of the fathers expressing their horror that these potions were so readily available. The impression given though was that they were both more worried about these potions being used on their girls. You can expect some apologies by owl soon."

Both Granger parents were delighted, not to mention relieved, that Hermione had such good friends. Anyone attempting to use these abominations on Hermione, or Padma, would find Harry and Neville standing in their way. Neither lad was likely to show anyone trying to potion the girls any mercy, Dan was positive one of Harry's razor sharp blades would be used on any wizard trying to drug Hermione.

"The Slytherin girl's parents denied sending any note or sweets, she of course had long since destroyed the incriminating parchment. The Hogwarts potion master is of the opinion this potion is well beyond the girl's brewing abilities, Master Pitslay has analysed his samples and agreed. The 'prank' potions were nothing more than infatuation strength, they would have worked well enough to have Harry here more than willing to kiss them. The other one would have seen him professing undying love and offering to run away together, not something a third year student could possibly brew, or should have access to. Gringotts are already considering action against the family, only awaiting the end of the ministry's investigation before imposing any restrictions."

There was one thing about this entire situation that bothered Emma. "We have wards on our home precisely to stop anyone sending something like that here, are you saying Hogwarts doesn't have this protection?"

It was actually Bill who answered Emma's question. "I've seen the ward scheme for this house, I needed to know what the wards would take for our lesson this morning. Along with the Patil property, it's some of Gringotts best work outside of the bank. Invisibility cloaks,

animagus forms, all the same to these wards. If Hermione doesn't add your name then no witch or wizard is getting past them."

This saw Harry blushing, and even Barchoke sit with his head down, Emma had no intention of letting that continue. "I would like to thank you both for helping protect this family. The more I learn of the magical world, the more I appreciate what you've done for us."

Seeing his godson's embarrassment caused Sirius to act. "I thought you four all earned 'outstandings' for your behaviour last night. Today, we're going to be looking more into the origins of wizarding society, and where all this formal code of conduct evolved from. Even today, not knowing the accepted and proper way to conduct yourself could see you facing a duel."

This drew Barchoke back into the conversation. "Goblin society is similar in that respect. Duels are discouraged as ways of settling disputes but sometimes there is no other alternative. A formal duel now needs the director's permission before it can take place. If the challenge is more to do with greed than honour, one or both parties could lose their heads before reaching the duelling pit."

"Well, I agree with Sirius. I thought you all conducted yourselves in a manner fitting for young lords and ladies." What Dan wasn't saying was that he had to choke back his laughter when Harry asked his permission to dance with Emma. Seeing the looks he was getting from the two ladies in his life inspired him to come up with a good answer. His reply of 'only if I get to dance with your beautiful date' won Daniel Granger smiles all round, and certainly helped make his evening more enjoyable. Now they were going to spend the afternoon discovering just what their daughter and her friends were learning each weekend, both parents hoped it would be a lot less violent than this morning's lesson.

As this was not only Neville's first time at the Grangers, but first time in a muggle house too, they were having take-away and a movie tonight. Hermione didn't think Neville was ready for a trip to the cinema just yet. Sirius mentioning that today's lesson would also touch on formal courtship behaviour focused everyone's attention back on the lesson for this afternoon - just as the marauder knew it would.

-oOoOo-

The minister's attention was focused on the Hogwarts Headmaster, and Cornelius was not liking what he was hearing. "You had fights breaking out around the castle, a dozen or so students had to spend the night in the infirmary, and it was only by sheer dumb luck Hogwarts avoided fatalities. You then have the nerve to stand there and try to pass this whole incident off as 'a harmless prank'. I'm beginning to think you're spending far too much time sitting in this room and talking to a bunch of dead headmasters, Albus, rather than seeing what is really going on in your school."

"I resent that accusation..."

Cornelius wasn't for backing down and came right back at Dumbledore. "...and I resent the fact that I'm here on a Saturday, trying to sort your mess out. These students are in your care, isn't it about time you started providing some?"

"I don't need to be lectured about my responsibilities by you..."

Visions of his grand scheme to get closer to the boy-who-lived being torn apart by this incident were fuelling the minister's rage. "Then perhaps it's time you started carrying them out, or passed them on to someone who will. We all know it's only a matter of time before this appears in the press, and the lad's father is also sure to react. I need to know what you are doing about this situation, and I need to know now!"

With Albus taken aback at this never before seen version of Cornelius, Minerva provided the answer. "All three girls got an immediate one week suspension, with a year's probation to follow. We all consider Miss Bole to be a far more serious case but, like the ministry, we can neither prove nor disprove her claims that she was instructed by her parents to carry this out. As to preventing this ever happening again, wards are not my field of expertise so I wouldn't even know where to start."

Amelia offered a suggestion. "What about contacting the goblins for advice on the school's wards? As Harry will be here at least nine months of the year, they may consider lending their expertise."

This suggestion didn't sit well with the headmaster. "The parents would never stand for handing over the very security of the castle to the goblins..." Once again, Albus found himself rudely interrupted.

"You're forgetting, Albus, I'm one of those parents. I would have no concerns about the goblins updating the Hogwarts wards, I do have serious concerns about the level of protection currently provided. If things don't improve, I'm also seriously considering moving Susan elsewhere. I can assure you there will be other parents thinking the same way about their daughter's safety."

The headmaster was beginning to think he was receiving the good auror / bad auror treatment as Cornelius picked right up where Amelia left off. The only problem with that analogy was that both the minister and the head of the DMLE appeared to be auditioning for the role of bad auror, with the good one dispatched straight to the rubbish tip.

"The situation would be much worse if it was a witch who had received these potions. I understand Harry is very protective of his best friend, I hate to think what would happen if it was she who had been targeted..."

Amelia's concern was there for all to see. "That's precisely my point, Cornelius. With the current configuration of Hogwarts wards, we have no way of knowing if anyone else received potions like this. With the staff sitting back and doing nothing, unless the situation explodes right in front of them, it hardly inspires confidence."

Minerva had a confession to make, one that wasn't going to be well received. "I contacted Harry's father about this incident, and wards were mentioned. Barchoke indicated to me that the goblins wouldn't be prepared to help Hogwarts, at least not while Albus Dumbledore is headmaster."

Three of the people currently in the headmaster's office thought that wasn't too unreasonable, Albus though had a different opinion. "Even with his own son attending Hogwarts, the goblins wouldn't help? Where is this caring father I hear you talking so much about now?"

His deputy though had an answer for her boss. "Barchoke knows Hogwarts herself will protect Harry from anyone trying to slip

something into his food, and we saw how well his son handled the situation where he didn't know the source of those chocolates. Barchoke also pointed out that it's our responsibility to keep the students safe, not his or Gringotts. Barchoke will take any necessary action to protect his son, that's as far as he and the goblin nation will go while Albus is headmaster. Albus has been banned from doing business with Gringotts for over a decade, they are not about to rush to his aid now."

Neither the politician or the lady of the law saw anything wrong with that argument, Albus once more disagreed. "The goblins are again interfering in wizarding affairs, this is something that needs to be brought before the Wizengamot."

The minister hit that on the head immediately, it wasn't the correct time for his solution to be aired in the chamber. "Where are they interfering? When did refusing to work with Albus Dumbledore become interfering in wizarding affairs?"

As usual, Amelia told it like she saw it. "If you were to take this to the chamber, it could start a movement to get you out of the castle. Your standing isn't exactly at it's highest point at the moment, and that's before this latest screw-up hits the Prophet. The members would probably think having their family protected by goblin wards while they attended Hogwarts would be a fair trade-off to get rid of the current headmaster. A headmaster who seems to blindly lurch from one crises to the next. Susan is the last of my family and I would certainly consider that result a fair trade to have her protected."

Albus was wondering how long his run of bad luck could continue. Every time he thought things couldn't get any worse, they promptly did. Had he known about the meeting that would be taking place that evening, Albus might have realised there was still a long way for him yet to fall.

-oOoOo-

Rita was shown into the usual office, nervous to hear how her latest journalistic efforts had been received. She liked the word 'journalistic' because that's precisely what she had been doing - conducting herself as a journalist should. She was quite proud of the parchment sitting on this goblin's desk, it was easily her best work. His first sentence though sent her hopes crashing.



"Miss Skeeter, we will not be sending this to the Prophet. Quite simply, it's much too good for them. Good doesn't do this work justice, it's nothing short of brilliant. This left me in a bit of a quandary though, what's the best way to use it. Tell me Miss Skeeter, have you ever considered writing a book?"

She was an animagus, not a metamorphmagus, but Barchoke would swear her eyes turned the shape and colour of a couple of galleons.

"I would like that very much." This could be massive for Rita. Any book featuring the information she was digging up on Dumbledore could be a best seller, add in the boy-who-lived plus you-know-who and it would be an instant hit. She decided to see just how much this goblin wanted her work, praise didn't pay the bills. "I think we should talk about an advance on prospective book sales, a possible percentage of the profits and I insist on editorial control - I don't want my discoveries diluted down so as not to upset some powerful people."

"Miss Skeeter, I can assure you we hope to upset some powerful people. Provided you can supply proof of your claims, we will print the book as potent as you wish. On the strength of the material you've already provided, I would be quite happy to discuss an advance on the book. I am considering purchasing a printing press so that the entire project can remain top secret. The first that anyone will know of this venture is when we announce the sale of Dumbledore's unofficial warts and all biography."

The goblin could see he had what he wanted, Miss Skeeter was well and truly hooked. It was time for Barchoke to reel her in. "I think a percentage of the profits is also something we can agree on here, we both need to get more information before settling on just what that percentage should be."

She quickly agreed to that too. For a shot at becoming a best selling author, Rita would probably have agreed to anything.

Barchoke was thinking that Gringotts share of the profits from this Albus Dumbledore expose would probably pay for the printing of Professor Hobson's book on the nation too. This would certainly place a smile on the director's face. Dumbledore publicly slaughtered, the nation moved even further into the limelight and a

profit being made in the process. For a goblin, it didn't get much better than that.

He made it plain to Rita that she was under no pressure to rush the rest of her research, they put an initial figure of six months on her having the first draft completed. They also discussed a possible release date, with Halloween looking favourite. September first was considered but the witch and goblin agreed that the extra two months would give them time to do it properly, that was more important to both than rushing something out to meet a deadline they'd just pulled out the air.

Rita left Gringotts with a spring in her step, life was looking good for the sacked reporter and she couldn't wait to see people eating their words. If it wasn't that the Prophet was the biggest source of free advertising, she wouldn't even give the back-stabbing bastards an interview when her book was released. That didn't mean she wasn't going to string them along though, she would soon have the Prophet begging her to come back.

-oOoOo-

Harry was unsure of his welcome as he approached the Ravenclaw table for breakfast, after returning on Monday morning - he needn't have worried. Any grumbings in the house had been quickly settled at dinner last night by three first year witches, each pointing out they had told their fellow Ravenclaws not to eat the chocolate.

They were also greeted by the sight of a contrite Cho Chang, who's apology to the group of friends felt a lot more genuine than the one she'd offered up to Hermione.

This actually confused the new arrivals. "I didn't know there were any Ravenclaws involved in sending me those chocolates?"

"There wasn't, Harry, and I didn't. I ate some of the chocolates that bitch Bole tried to slip you. I found myself skipping class and stalking that Slytherin along to transfiguration, only to jump into a fight with two fifth years and a sixth - all of whom had the same potions-fuelled idea. You can probably guess I got my arse kicked, but those flushing potions we had forced down our throat were a lot worse - to our bodies and our egos."

Harry was bemused to where Cho was going with this, as were most of their house, currently watching this while enjoying breakfast. The little second year didn't keep them waiting long.

"Lying in the infirmary gave me the time to consider my behaviour toward you, and I wasn't proud of it. I could have been one of your friends, instead I became a whining spoilt little brat - determined to claim your undivided attention. For all the trouble that I've caused, I'm really sorry."

Cho then left to get ready for her first class, leaving Penny to try and offer some form of explanation to a stunned table.

"I was one of those fifth years fighting over Bole, and I was absolutely disgusted with myself. You actually know what you're saying and doing, but have no control over those actions - or even your emotions. The potion has a total grip of you, everything you say and do is centred around pleasing the new most important person in your life. I understand where Cho is coming from, everyone in the infirmary did a lot of thinking over this. As bad as Valentine's day was, we all recognised it could have been so much worse. Had that been a boy who had slipped me the same potion, I would have done anything to please him..."

Penny was a very popular figure in Ravenclaw, and everyone felt her pain as a visible shudder of revulsion passed through her. It was also obvious most of the witches present shared in her fear of these potions, this incident had brought crashing home just how vulnerable they all were. Neither was it missed by anyone in the castle that it took Harry's insistence to have the aurors involved. The very thought of what these potions could do was bad enough, without it then being classed merely as a school prank and swept under the rug.

The story had broken in yesterday's Prophet and led to a flock of owls from concerned parents, all desperate to know their children were okay. Madam Bones announcing her intentions to bring a motion before the Wizengamot that would class these potions as liquid forms of the Imperius curse was a measure that certainly got the full backing of everyone inside the castle. The practically unanimous opinion of the students was that anyone using one of these potions deserved to have their arse flung straight into Azkaban.

Having just returned from a fabulous weekend, the quartet couldn't miss the stark contrast from the fun and laughter of Crawley to the depressing atmosphere currently inside Hogwarts. Penny was usually such a bubbly witch, a witch who took her prefect duties very seriously. All the first year Claws thought of her as a friend and confidant. Harry was discovering that these potions were loathed by witches almost as much as they were by the goblins, but it took him being attacked by these disgusting things to get something done about it. Once more, the nation was influencing the wizarding community through the boy-who-lived.

Harry also thought there was a quick and simple way to lift Penny's spirits, he would worry about the expense later. "As you now know, we goblins find these potions repulsive and consider them our unforgivable's. So much so, our potion masters weren't content with just developing an antidote. They invented a preventative elixir that neutralises most of these potion's effects on you, an elixir that offers the drinker months of protection. A victim would still know someone had slipped them a love potion - and even who the chemical attraction is keyed to, but you'd remain in control. More importantly, you'd still have enough control to fight back or seek help. I'll contact my father and ask if Master Pitslay can bring some on Friday. One dose should protect you until at least the summer holidays.

The tears welling in Penny's eyes were in stark contrast to the smile breaking out on her face.

"You would have to drink the elixir in front of Master Pitslay though, we won't take the chance of this formula slipping into anyone else's hands. The last thing we need is for these brewers to develop a potion that can get around our elixir's defences. Marietta, could you tell Cho the offer is open to her too?"

Harry quickly indicated to his friends that he intended to have them protected as well, getting broad smiles from Hermione and Padma. Hermione's bracelet provided some protection but the elixir was better. A nod to Lisa, Morag and Mandy was greeted with wide smiles too. Offering the elixir to Parvati, Hannah and Susan was also something Harry would do before the morning was out.

The Prophet being delivered then drew everyone's attention to the newspaper. As expected, the follow-up to the potions incident was

front page news. The ministry were reluctantly forced to admit there was nothing they could do, except pursue the suppliers of these vile potions. A statement from Gringotts was more forthcoming. They pointed out that, while they understood that the ministry needed evidence to prosecute, Gringotts were under no such obligation when it came to deciding who they were willing to conduct business with. There was no question that a member of the Bole family had attempted to attack a centurion, by use of an illegal potion to ensnare him. This was more than enough for the bank to withdraw all services to the Bole family, and demand a settlement of all outstanding loans and debts.

There was absolutely no sympathy for the Bole family at the Ravenclaw table, and not much in the rest of the castle either. Miss Bole would convince her parents she needed transferred out of Hogwarts before the end of her week's suspension, an action that again lifted the spirits of those inside the castle.

The Weasley twins also had a plan, or rather a prank, to lift Hogwarts spirits. As a side issue, it also gave their headmaster a chance to experience first hand what it was like to be controlled by a potion. Fred and George had also been present when Dumbledore had fought against the involvement of the aurors, both were certain he wouldn't call them for this. Working with Master Pitslay had seen their potions ability advance by leaps and bounds, and finally the once untouchable Albus Dumbledore was now within their grasp.

A hush settled over the hall as Dumbledore climbed onto the staff table and started cavorting about on his knuckles and toes, his chimpanzee noises were clearly audible. McGonagall lifted her plate off the table and onto her lap, still eating her breakfast while sitting back and watching the show. This set the tone of response from the rest of the professors and her approach to the situation was copied up and down the staff table.

Henrika had just returned that morning with the four first years and this impromptu entertainment was topping off a wonderful weekend. She could easily imagine Sirius, Barchoke and Master Pitslay sitting around the memory she was going to be sending and pissing themselves laughing, as some unknown individuals made a monkey out of Dumbledore.

A/N thanks for reading

## Chapter 27

It was an impassioned Amelia Bones who presented her case to the assembled Wizengamot, this really was something very close to her heart. Attempting to change centuries of accepted abuse was never going to be easy though. When the first protest came, it was from an unexpected quarter. Amelia had counted on the backing of all the witches in the Wizengamot, apparently she was wrong to make that assumption. Oh how she hated that hem, hem, and the false, high pitched little-girl voice that wasn't fooling anyone. Apart from clearly failing the long, slim part of the criteria, Dolores Umbridge was pure barracuda.

"I am having difficulty understanding Madam Bones' concern over this matter. Didn't I read in the Prophet the other week that, due to her association with this Crow creature, her niece was now taking some goblin concoction that supposedly protected the girl from unscrupulous wizards?"

Dolores' smile never reached her eyes. Here was the fabled wicked witch who would attempt to ensnare children into her gingerbread house, only to cook their bones in her cauldron. A false sweet and innocent facade hiding the real evil behind, but not fooling those who knew what Dolores really was. She smilingly twisted the proverbial dagger her question had just thrust into the heart of Amelia's proposal. "One is then left to wonder about the motive behind this motion. Could it be to bring further publicity to what is nothing more than a very minor matter? Thus allowing her goblin friends to make even more gold from selling this protection myth to frightened fathers of young witches."

Amelia was livid. Her years spent as an auror had taught her not to waste time and energy by fighting against that anger, but to use that very same anger to aid her in battle. There was no doubt Amelia was now embroiled in a battle, a battle she intended to win. Umbridge was not only going down, Amelia was going to bury her for getting personal and introducing Susan into the argument. Wizengamot chamber decorum now allowed Amelia to get personal in her rebuffing of this bitch's argument, the head of the DMLE intended to take full advantage of that.

"Although Susan is my niece, I have raised her since she was a toddler as both her parents were murdered by death eaters. I look

on Susan as my daughter and of course want to protect her, just as any parent would. It is perfectly understandable that Madam Umbridge doesn't have the maternal experience to comprehend this emotion."

Amelia had a lot more to say, taking Dolores' deliberately misconstrued supposition apart a piece at a time. "She is also badly misinformed about the goblin elixir that now protects my niece's virtue and honour. At no point did gold changed hands between myself and the goblins over this matter, nor were the other young witches currently using this elixir asked for any form of payment. Harry is one of the most honourable people I have ever met, and he just wanted his friends protected from this vile and very real threat. I for one sleep better at night knowing Susan has this protection, and such a good friend looking out for her." Stick that in your pipe and smoke it, bitch. Amelia though wasn't finished, not by a long shot. Her anger had just sparked a piece of inspiration, inspiration that might provide a method for swinging everyone behind her proposal.

Her voice may have been steady but Amelia's determination to end a perceived wrong shone through. "Before us is a motion to criminalise these potions, potions that don't just affect and control witches. For generations, stories have been smugly and almost jokingly banded about of witches using these type of potions to 'get a wizard interested' in their charms. This behaviour has almost become socially acceptable in our society, but it is every bit as wrong as a wizard using these disgusting potions to take advantage of a witch." This bit of truth shook the chamber out of its apathy, Amelia had just made this real for them. She pressed home that advantage. "Imagine if you will, waking up beside a person you would never willingly take to bed."

Amelia's attention was currently fixed on Dolores, and not by accident. "Now, bad as that is, add in a ring or a child conceived while under the influence of these potions and you have an instant recipe for disaster."

Amelia's stare had now focused the chamber's attention onto Dolores. This was unwanted attention that saw Umbridge become red with rage, as wizard after wizard drew the conclusion Amelia had hoped for. The only way a wizard would ever end up in bed with Dolores Umbridge was under the influence of a massive amount of alcohol, or one of these potions. While waking up with a hangover

beside Umbridge may be a vomit inducing scenario, at least they would have the knowledge they must have been far too drunk to have gotten up to anything. These potions were an entirely different matter.

Amelia's victory was never in doubt after that, with a discussion on a sliding scale of severity actually taking place before the vote was cast. The final ballot handed a landslide victory to the head of the DMLE, and it would now be illegal to brew, posses and especially use a love potion in Britain.

-oOoOo-

Cornelius had the delighted head of the DMLE in his office for a celebratory drink, and couldn't help but wonder why he hadn't listened to Amelia's council more often. This decision today would certainly assist his plans to bring the goblins closer, and he was now certain Amelia would be a great team member to have on his side to help see those plans realised.

"I would like to offer my personal congratulations on your victory today, you spearheaded that brilliantly through an originally apathetic chamber. I was wondering if you would like the same challenge for a cause that I've been working on? This time though, the chamber might be downright hostile."

The minister could see he had piqued her interest, and attempted to make the offer irresistible. "What I need from you though is a promise of secrecy, until I'm ready to introduce this to the chamber. Even if you oppose the idea, which I obviously don't think you will, I must still have your promise."

Asking to have the head of the DMLE on board meant there was no way this could be something that was even slightly dodgy, and her promise of silence only lasted until the motion was introduced. "Okay, Cornelius, I'll bite. Just what are you up to?"

The minister waited until she'd actually given her word before passing on the information. "I want to shut down Arthur Weasley's department, and make him head of a new one, one that handles all our relations between the ministry, the muggles and the goblins."



As Amelia was mentally running through the ramifications of that, she held her glass out for a refill. She took a sip before coming up with questions that got right to the heart of the matter. "Weasley is an inspired choice. Old pureblood family, loves muggles and has a son who's employed by Gringotts - and also teaches Harry. I'm assuming you're using that connection to sound out the goblins about this proposal?"

"Their responses appear to be very positive, and so far they've not demanded anything that would break the deal. We've been asked to recognise an ambassador, an ambassador who would handle all their dealings with the ministry - Weasley would be our representative."

This made perfect sense to Amelia. For the ministry to accept an ambassador from the goblins would be the wizards and witches of Britain acknowledging they were a sovereign nation, a large leap up from considering them beasts. With some Wizengamot members thinking muggles and goblins were equally beneath them, Cornelius might actually have a chance of getting this through the chamber without too much of a fight. "Can you tell me anything more?"

"Barchoke's name has been put forward as their first ambassador..."

This started Amelia laughing. "Oh that is just priceless! Have you a timescale in mind?"

"I was hoping to introduce this at the end of June. A motion that changes laws and charters must sit in the chamber forty days to allow proper time for discussion, and give any opposition time to build their arguments. During those forty days I'm gambling on Harry attending the ministry summer ball, putting public pressure on those hoping to scupper the motion."

Finishing off her drink, Amelia gave Cornelius the bad news. "Harry won't be in Britain at that time, I've seen his summer plans - because I'll be joining him for part of those holidays."

It was now Cornelius' turn to finish his drink. He thought for a moment before being totally honest with his head of DMLE. "Amelia, without Harry at that ball, I don't think I can get the votes needed to pull this off. You clearly have information I don't, how can I get Harry to the ball?"

"The problem might be his guests. Harry's invited them on holiday with him, I don't know whether he'd leave those guests and return to Britain - just so he could attend a ministry ball."

The minister was basically thinking out loud now, he needed this to happen. "What if we invited his guests too? Just who are we talking about?"

"I see a couple of problems with that. The Bones, Abbots, Longbottoms and Patils shouldn't pose any political trouble, neither would Sirius Black and his date. Harry probably wouldn't even consider attending without Miss Granger, but it's her parents and Barchoke that will be the main obstacles. Can you swing a pair of muggles and a goblin attending the ministry's premier event?"

Fudge didn't get to be minister without being able to put a political spin on just about anything. "What if we gave the group their own table? Add in the Weasleys as the ministry representative, you would be there as Harry's invited guest. Do you think the Grangers and Barchoke would be accepted for the opportunity to attend the premier magical event in Europe this summer, a ball with the boy-who-lived as the guest of honour. The goblins made him a centurion for chasing a ghost out of Hogwarts, it's now the ministry's turn to honour our saviour. We could even hold it on his birthday, and come up with some kind of gift or award to show how much the Potters' sacrifice means to us. What do you think?"

"I think you have the beginnings of a great idea. Rather than trying to heap honours onto Harry, I think you may have more success if you honoured James and Lily. Yes, by all means include Harry in any award but this spreads it around, and may make the evening more palatable to everyone attending."

The minister loved that idea. "We get to honour James and Lily Potter, as well as Harry Crow. That would certainly pacify some of the more traditional families who usually attend."

Both knew what Cornelius meant by 'more traditional' but now they were left to decide what form the award would take. They still had time so decided to ask Barchoke for his opinion. Changed days indeed when a goblin was being consulted on a prestigious ministry

event. Amelia hadn't actually said she was on board for this adventure, as usual, she let her actions speak for her.

-oOoOo-

Severus intended to let his actions speak for him too, or rather his inactions. Despite repeated prompting from Albus and Lucius, he wanted nothing to do with Harry Crow. Severus had no intention of going anywhere near the lad, painful things seemed to happen to those antagonists who got too close to Centurion Crow. Albus and Lucius being two prime examples.

He understood Albus' fear, it was hard not to. The headmaster ensured Severus knew the history of Tom Riddle, and Crow was so far ahead of where that future dark lord had reached at the same age it was terrifying Albus. Harry had political influence and financial power that a young Tom couldn't even dream about, and that was without taking into account the whole Hogwarts Champion and a centurion to boot. If Tom Riddle had those same advantages when he'd set foot inside the castle, Severus had not one shred of doubt Britain would now be ruled by Lord Voldemort.

Today's Prophet emphasised the casual power wielded by this eleven year old. The law had just changed because Harry Crow had been sent some potion-centred chocolates by owl. He neither ate the chocolates nor asked for the law to be changed, the ministry just tripped over itself in its haste to appease the boy.

What Severus was struggling to understand was the way Albus kept trying to pedal the same old shit in Harry's direction, after repeatedly being slapped down for that very action. What made it worse though was his repeated efforts to get Severus to join him in this fatally flawed campaign.

He wondered if Albus getting his own way, unopposed for so long, left him unable to adapt when things suddenly stopped proceeding as he intended they should. The headmaster was unquestionably a learned wizard, yet appeared to be blinkered where Harry was concerned. When his scheming didn't work, there was no plan B - just a different variation of the same shit plan that had already spectacularly failed. Even his godson, Draco, had learnt to leave Crow alone, yet Albus seemed incapable of grasping the same lesson that was blatantly obvious to a pre-teen boy. Perhaps the

headmaster suffered from a simple case of arrogance, Albus Dumbledore knew better than everyone else - so therefore he must be right. It didn't really matter to Severus what it was, he still wanted no part of it.

What Severus really struggled to understand was the puzzle of why the sorting hat had placed the boy in Ravenclaw. His mother was still the brightest witch Severus had ever met in his life. While he may have called the lad's father a stuck-up arrogant bullying bastard of a git, stupid was not a term you could associate with James Potter. Harry though, while undoubtedly very bright, was easily the most Slytherin child to come through Hogwarts since Salazar opened his house to students. His godson was supposed to be a Slytherin yet Severus shuddered to think what Draco's attitude would be like with even a tenth of Harry's power and fame.

Harry on the other hand quietly went about his business, cultivating close friends and associates while destroying enemies with an efficient ruthlessness Salazar Slytherin would have been proud of. Crow ruled the first years without even trying or apparently meaning to do so, the entire year-group following him out the great hall from the Christmas Feast being the best example Severus could think of.

On the other hand, Dumbledore's popularity had slipped to a level Argus Filch would be hard pressed to match. That picture in the Prophet with Harry standing over a bloody Albus Dumbledore was a massive blow to his public persona. Even though the newspaper clearly stated it was Sirius Black who had knocked Albus to the floor, it was the image of Crow standing there with his sword pinning Dumbledore down everyone remembered.

Severus was certain that those blasted Weasley twins were responsible for making Albus go ape, purely due to the fact Crow and his friends had just returned to the castle that very morning. With no proof, and the headmaster's already noted attitude to pranks and potions, Minerva wouldn't even allow him to take points from her house. It was now obvious to everyone that the headmaster was losing control of the school, and wouldn't be in the castle much longer if he didn't modify his behaviour.

This presented Severus with an even greater dilemma, what to do if Albus got booted out of Hogwarts? There existed an uneasy state of detente between himself and Crow at the moment, that would swiftly

switch to all out war should the lad ever discover the part one Severus Snape played in the Potters' demise. The potions master was sure being barred from Gringotts would be the least of his problems, keeping his head attached to his neck would be his number one priority. Albus wanted Severus to stay in Hogwarts but all bets would be off if there was a new headmaster in charge.

His mind was made up, if / when Dumbledore got kicked out the castle - Severus would then make his own escape. Should Crow manage to get Albus out of Hogwarts, even defeating the dark lord might not be beyond this lad's growing capabilities. After that, Magical Britain would swoon at his feet - and give him anything he asked for. Crow requesting Severus Snape's head on a stick was a distinct possibility. He needed to get said head onto the other side of the planet before that happened. The magical world might not know a lot about goblins, but asking one you'd wronged for mercy was simply a waste of breath - probably your last breath too.

-oOoOo-

Sirius was out of breath by the time he'd climbed all the way up the hills, his dragon hide boots standing up to the journey through this desolate landscape better than the rest of his attire. He could have apparated by line of sight but Sirius didn't want to make the person he was here to see any more nervous than he had to. By making his way up the hill - bloody mountain - on foot, he would have been visible for ages, and recognisable for at least the last half a mile.

He approached the lone figure carefully, making no sudden movements and keeping his empty hands in plain sight. "You're a hard person to find, hidden away in this wilderness. Well, at least I know you're still a marauder. What a prank, putting a wolf in charge of the sheep. How's it going shepherd Lupin, you look like shit!"

"At least I'm dressed for the terrain, and the weather. Who the hell picked your clothes?"

"My beautiful blond girlfriend, it's supposed to be the latest fashion. She's a Swedish veela who's taken pity on an old dog, and my tail has never stopped wagging since. If you think I'm going to say anything other than 'yes honey' to whatever she wants, then you're crazier than you look, Moony."

The ragged and weather-beaten man replied with a sarcastic laugh. "Well I certainly considered me being crazy as one option when I saw you tripping through the heather. The old timers told me this would happen if I spent too much time up here by myself, seems they were right. Humour a crazy old werewolf and tell me how you managed to get your badly tailored arse out of Azkaban?"

"Harry and his father sprung me..."

Remus now had an angry look in his eyes, and a wand in his hand.

"Harry also sliced clean through the wand of the last wizard who drew on me, you have no idea how proud I am to say it was Albus Dumbledore he faced down - I've even got the pictures to prove it."

He could see this wasn't helping his friend understand so got serious. "Sorry Moony, I should have said Harry's adopted father. I know better than anyone James and Lily are dead, but I wasn't the secret keeper. I still blame myself for their deaths though, convincing them to swap to Peter was just stupid. Rat bastard led his master straight to them. He's still out there, Remus, but I had to promise Harry's father I wouldn't go chasing after him. I was told in no uncertain terms that Harry needs his godfather in his life, he also needs his Uncle Moony..."

"Now I know this is real, my imagination could never come up with a story half as crazy as that. Sirius, if this is your idea of some bullshit prank, I swear I'll kill you myself."

"Marauder's honour, Moony. Henrika really is a beautiful blond Swedish veela..."

Moony sprang at Sirius and soon they were hugging like long lost brothers - which is effectively what they were.

-oOoOo-

To eleven and twelve year olds, anyone out of their teens was considered old. By that method of reckoning, Professor McGonagall was ancient. Using this same measuring scale, the small stooped witch currently standing next to their transfiguration professor must be Methuselah's mother.

It was Neville who provided the witch's identity to his three friends as they took their usual seats in transfiguration. "That's Griselda Marchbanks, she's a friend of my gran's. She is also head of the wizarding examination board, I wonder what she's doing here? OWL's and NEWT's don't start for nearly five weeks, and we're only first year."

This caused Hermione to stop as if she'd been pole axed, earning concerned glances from her friends. "I can't believe exams are just over four weeks away, and I forgot all about them. I haven't even started revising..."

Her panic attack would need to wait until later as McGonagall now demanded her class' full attention. "Good morning class. As you have already noticed, we have a visitor with us this morning. Madam Marchbanks has been testing Hogwarts students since the headmaster sat his NEWT's, I've asked her here today in the hope of gaining her expert opinion on this class. I want this to be a class exercise so today we will all be working on transfiguring the same type of item."

Minerva's wand soon had trays containing teapots landing at the end of each bench, her students knew what to do with them.

If it was anyone else other than Minerva McGonagall asking for this favour, Griselda would have rather impolitely told them to get stuffed. She figured Minnie had discovered a transfiguration prodigy, why else would she be handing out teapots to a group of first years. Griselda couldn't quite remember whether the teapot to turtle transfiguration was the end of second year, or the beginning of third, it certainly wasn't taught in first.

The ancient witch needed her cane to keep from falling over as student after student completed the transfiguration. That wasn't what made Griselda's head spin though, they were using neither a recognised spell nor wand movements. Minerva soon had a chair configured for her guest before turning back to her class. "Very well done. Now, as a treat, I want you spending the rest of the lesson using your imagination to see what else you can transfigure that teapot into. Madam Marchbanks and I will be observing, and I better not see anything dangerous on your bench."

Minerva conjured a chair for herself and a small table between them. No sooner was the table solid than a tea service appeared on it. The professor poured tea for both of them, since Griselda couldn't take her eyes off the first years.

"I know exactly how you feel, this breaks the rules of magic we apparently only thought existed. I couldn't tell you about it before, you wouldn't have believed me anyway. This is one of those things you really need to see for yourself."

With her hand shaking more than usual, Griselda reached for her tea. "Minnie, I'm looking at it, and I still don't believe it. Now, before my old heart gives up in shock, I want you to tell me exactly what we're witnessing here."

She was listening to a tale of goblin transfiguration while watching a menagerie of small animals run, scurry and hop around the benches.

"...so now I have a class that are so far ahead of their peers, I have no idea how to proceed into second year. They don't learn spells and there are no books to deal with a situation like this. As a written test, I required an essay on the difficulties of transfiguring inanimate material into a living creature. The essays were astonishing. They didn't waste reams of parchment giving me the wrong spells or back to front wand movements, every single one of them got the fact that it was all about concentration - and their ability to properly imagine the creature they were aiming for."

Madam Griselda Marchbanks didn't become the head of the exam board because she was stupid, the old witch caught on at once. "Strip away the spell and wand movements, that's all there is left."

"Exactly! This leaves a very big problem though. This is easily the best class I have ever taught, but every single one of them will fail the current OWL and NEWT exams. They'll ace the practicals, then fail miserably at the written part - because it's information they don't need to know. I could have them conjuring items in their second year, because every session is spent with a wand in their hand."

"Do you plan on rolling this out through the school?"

"No, for a few good reasons. I'm having to learn a different way to transfigure myself, it will take a while longer to get the harder spells



down. I think that's purely because I've been doing them a different way for most of my life. It's not easy to concede there's a better way to do something that you're a certified master of, I can't ignore what's right in front of me though. There are students in this class who would struggle with traditional methods, you can see for yourself how quickly they're picking this up."

Griselda found it impossible to refute what was right in front of her eyes. Minerva though wasn't finished.

"I'm hoping you can help me with the other reason. If the exams can't be changed, I'm going to have to spend the next six years teaching this class spells they will never use. On those headings, I won't teach September's new first year this method."

This drew a sharp response from her friend. "You have to continue teaching this method, I've never seen children this young so comfortable with their magic. I'll bring the rest of the examiners in to observe this class when we're here in June, I won't say a word to them beforehand. If we changed the exam to, say seventy five percent practical, with the rest made up of a few essay questions, that should be acceptable. We could even raise the threshold of transfiguration we expect them to be able to accomplish. Otherwise, this lot will be at Ordinary Wizarding Level by the end of their third year. I take it some of the class are even more accomplished than what we're seeing here?"

With a smile, Minerva levitated a large block of wood in Harry's direction. She'd hoped Griselda would ask that question. "Centurion Crow, would you please show Madam Marchbanks what this method of transfiguration is capable of?"

It took a moment of thought before Harry decided what he wanted to do. The block of wood became a young lion cub, before being transfigured into a magnificent golden eagle. If there was any doubt what Harry was attempting, it ended when the eagle became a badger. A large silver serpent drew some gasps, before a baby dragon changed those gasps to shrieks.

Hermione heard Harry telling the dragon to behave itself and asked if it was safe to touch. Being told to keep talking to it and scratch behind its ears saw her do just that.

The deputy headmaster of Hogwarts and the head of the wizarding exam board were just as enthralled as the rest of the class. Watching in disbelief as the young muggle born witch scratched a baby dragon while talking to it in gobbledygook.

Minerva finally found her voice. "I understood the house emblems, Centurion Crow, but why the baby dragon?"

"The symbol of Gringotts professor. I may have been sorted into Ravenclaw but I'm still a goblin."

Hermione removed her hand and, when no one else appeared interested in emulating her feat, Harry returned the dragon to the block of wood he started with.

The bell signalled the end to the quickest lesson Griselda could ever remember, the time had appeared to fly past. She watched as student after student transfigured their creation back to the original teapot, and placed it on the end of their bench as they left. There were no bags to pack, no books or parchment to put away. Stow their wands and leave, that was all they had to do.

Excitement buzzed around the ancient witch's body. She casually told the tale of being Albus Dumbledore's examiner for his NEWT's, what she didn't often mention was that those exams were still the same one's sat by today's young witches and wizards. Do the same shit for over a century and it was hard to get excited about it. Here was something new, so new it practically blew her mind.

"Minerva, you have to continue this. They've four years yet before they sit OWL's, that gives us plenty of time to bring in a new exam. If Hogwarts has another four years worth of students, trained in this method, following on behind - the ministry will be forced to change the exam."

The professor could see the sense in that argument. It was one she wouldn't have considered though without Griselda's backing.

"I want you to keep me informed of their progress, this class will be our test group and I want them closely monitored. Gauging their abilities will be necessary for setting the exam criterion. If as I suspect, the transfiguration they perform in that exam is of a far

higher standard than currently required for OWL's, publicising that should quickly kill off any opposition."

She could hardly wait to bring the rest of the examiners to see this class, it had been at least a couple of decades since Griselda had felt like that about spending the beginning of June inside Hogwarts.

-oOoOo-

They had no sooner left the classroom than Harry broached the subject that had got Hermione hot and bothered before class started. He was worried his best friend was regretting all the time they spent together, and would now want to spend that time studying for exams. What made it worse in Harry's opinion was that these were exams he was sure they would both ace.

"You seemed worried about our exams, Hermione, surely you know you'll be top in all your classes?"

"Harry, you're miles ahead in defence, potions and transfiguration. Neville has green thumbs to go with those green fingers of his and stargazer Patil here has us all beat in astronomy. I might get top in charms and history of magic, but that's hardly all my classes."

"Isn't that enough?"

It was a serious question, a question that deserved a serious answer. Although the question had come from Padma, she could see the concern in Harry's eyes. If he thought for one second she was going to stop hanging around with her best friend to go on some revision crusade, he was badly mistaken. "It was more surprise at Neville mentioning exams, and me not realising how close they were. Before Hogwarts, I would have had a chart on my wall at home, with a colour-coded revision schedule all worked out, since April. We spent April hammering through our extra lessons, and getting another upgrade to our potions books. Not once did I even think of exams."

Neville was confused, not a new state for him when with his friends but one that he'd been experiencing less of late. "You say that as if it's a bad thing, Hermione."

"Oh, it's certainly not a bad thing, it was more a surprise at myself. Before Hogwarts, exams were all I had - only books were my friends. I think it just hit me how much I had changed, and I'm very happy with those changes. I'm still going to try and beat Harry to be number one student in our year, but I can live with it if he wins."

This got a chuckle out of Neville. "Well, we've certainly got enough experience of it. He beats us every weekend in defence. I know what you mean though, my gran barely lets me out of her sight at home. I've never had friends before either so Hogwarts has been unbelievable for me too."

"Well, I've enjoyed it as well. Being in a different house from my sister has allowed me to be myself, instead of everyone looking at us as if we were two half's of the same person. I know George and Fred play on that aspect a lot, but sometimes I think they are the same person. Parvati and I are very different. I need to catch her before lunch, I'll see you guys then."

As their friend headed off, a smiling Harry thought he'd changed the most. He didn't mention that though, they had far more important things to talk about with Padma gone. "Okay, now we've sorted that out, what are we going to do for the twins' birthday? We can use the room again for a party, I think we better check with McGonagall first this time."

Both agreed with that idea before Neville aired his thoughts on the real problem. "I think the way Harry handled it at Christmas was the right idea. Getting Parvati a gift as Padma's sister. I like Parvati, I just don't want her getting the wrong idea and hanging all over me because I wish her a happy birthday."

Both Harry and Hermione were in total agreement with that. Padma meant a lot to all three of them and her twin sister had to be taken into consideration. With Hogwarts help, a party for both would be easily arranged, and they had Sirius or Eargit to acquire any gifts they needed to buy.

Since Lavender would have to be invited, any plans toward a surprise birthday party died then and there. The blond Gryffindor would have the story spread all over the castle within hours of being told, so there was no chance of her keeping it from Parvati.

-oOoOo-

With a general invite to all students of first year, Minerva couldn't find a reason to refuse their plans for a party. That she, Filius and Henrika were all invited too made it an easy decision for the deputy headmistress to reach. Usually birthday parties would be held in the celebrating student's common room. With the twins being sorted into different houses, that option was not available in this instance.

Harry and Neville made their way from the staff table, the Ravenclaw smiling while the Gryffindor searched for the courage his house was noted for. Both boys made their way to identical Asian witches, with the same task in mind.

Harry knew he was getting off lightly while Neville wished for the umpteenth time the hat had placed him in Ravenclaw with his friends.

"Padma, we know it's your birthday tomorrow and wanted to hold a party in the room. McGonagall just gave us permission..."

A shriek of delight pierced the great hall, and probably a few eardrums too! All eyes were drawn to where Parvati had Neville in what could easily be described as a headlock, while she jumped up and down in excitement.

"You made Neville tell Parvati?"

"Hey, he's the Gryffindor - I'm not brave enough for that. We're asking all of first year, we'll have our dinner there Saturday night. Some of the professors will be there too, and Sirius of course."

The young witch's eyes sparkled with moisture as she answered her friends. "That will be wonderful, and thanks for including Pav."

"No problem, her birthday is the second of May too..."

Harry thought he was getting better at cracking jokes as both Padma and Hermione began laughing. It was only when he spotted Parvati out the corner of his eye, heading at speed straight for a certain centurion, he realised the joke was on him. Harry bracing himself for the worse just saw the two girls laugh harder.

The excitement of a party swept through the great hall, infecting every house. This presented a problem for Draco, what to do? He'd kept his distance from Crow, no more antagonising but certainly no socialising either. Now he was being forced to make a decision. Tales of the great time had by those who followed Crow out the hall at Christmas had Draco wanting to attend, but his pride was in the way.

It was only thinking about the instructions his father had given that allowed Draco to circumvent his prideful obstacle. His father wanted information on Crow, so Draco could put this down as a spying mission. Of course, he would have to pretend to enjoy himself - otherwise he would stand out like a sore thumb. A spy needed to be unobtrusive and inconspicuous, Draco intended to blend right in.

Ron Weasley had no such dilemma, there would be cake, he was sort of invited - no brainer! He would finally get to see this room Seamus and Dean raved about - there might even be some of that goblin ale that was supposedly better than butterbeer. Ron finally had something to look forward to that wasn't related to Gryffindor playing Quidditch.

Albus watched on, a mere observer as the castle slipped a little further from his grasp. His opinion was neither sought, nor did he think it would be listened to. For Albus Dumbledore, being ignored was a new experience - and not in anyway a pleasant one.

A/N thanks for reading

A/N 2 I have been incredibly busy lately, so much so that I haven't one word written of the next chapter. Hope to maintain my weekly posting schedule but it may slip by a day or two.

## Chapter 28

Sirius finished their lesson early to allow the girls plenty of time to get ready for the party, and so he could have a private talk with his godson. Padma and Hermione left chatting to Henrika about what they were going to wear tonight, Neville quickly headed in the opposite direction from that of the three witches.

The moment they were alone, Sirius gave Harry the news he'd been asked to deliver. "Your father had a visit from Amelia Bones yesterday, and wants to come to Hogwarts tomorrow to talk with you about it. He wouldn't come today because it was the girls' birthday..."

Harry could see Sirius didn't understand his father's delay so tried to explain. "We goblins don't celebrate Christmas, or any of the other days of the year that wizards and muggles use as an excuse for a day off to party. Someone's birthday though is their most important day of the year, and really should be celebrated. He wouldn't want anything to disturb what we've set up for tonight. Have you any idea what this visit from Amelia was about?"

"I got the impression that the ministry were trying to forge closer ties to the nation, and of course you were stuck right in the middle of it. I think our guess at Christmas appears to be spot on, and a certain someone might be making an appearance at the Ministry's Summer Ball."

"Just as well I've had all those extra lessons on wizarding etiquette then, thanks to Lord Black. You got a date for this ball?"

This drew a smile from his godfather, delighted that their relationship had reached the stage where they joked easily in each other's company. "Well, since I assume the most beautiful witch we both know will soon have a date, I was going to ask Henrika. What do you think the chances are she'll say yes?"

Sirius was surprised that Harry didn't have a smart answer for him, his godson actually appeared troubled about something. "You think Henrika will say no, or are you worried that Hermione might?"

The joking was gone as Harry asked him a serious question, probably one of the most serious questions it was possible to ask another person. "Sirius, how do you know when a girl is the one?"

This had Sirius back-peddalling. He was delighted beyond words that Harry trusted him enough to ask that question, and terrified beyond measure of the consequences should he muck it up. "Wow Harry, that's a biggie! Have you asked your father?"

"Goblins are different, Sirius, apparently the couple just know when they've met their life partner. My father explained it as the couple being instantly attracted to each other, growing very close in a short space of time and never wanting to be parted. Here's the problem though, I think I may be more goblin than anyone thought possible. My father's own words kinda perfectly describes how I feel about Hermione. My problem is I don't know what to do next."

"Harry, at your age that's not necessarily a bad thing..." Sirius realised he'd gotten it wrong by the anger in his godson's reply.

"I am head of a noble and ancient house, hold the rank of centurion and am champion of Hogwarts. That troll never complained about how young I was when I had to cut it down. If you can't take this seriously, I'll talk to Curse-breaker Weasley about it."

This forced Sirius to really look at the young wizard / goblin in front of him and concede his godson was correct, Harry certainly never acted eleven so perhaps it was time to stop treating him as such. "I'm sorry Harry, your question just threw me for a moment. I'm still struggling to see what your problem is here. We both know how Hermione feels about you, a knock-back is certainly not on the cards."

"Sorry, Sirius, I shouldn't be getting angry with you. Last year I told Hermione I wouldn't even think of starting anything before Voldemort was gone, neither of us have any idea how long that could be. Hermione is beautiful, smart and just wonderful to spend time with - what if she gets fed-up waiting on me and looks elsewhere? I don't think I could handle that."

"Harry, Hermione is as likely to look elsewhere as you are. Since the entire country now knows who she is, and you will in all probability be taking her to the ministry ball, I don't see how asking her to be your girlfriend could be putting her in any more danger. Just from watching you two, I know she is anything but a distraction to your training. You work harder just to please her, and she does the exact



same for you. My advice would be to just ask the girl, though you get to tell Dan and Emma."

"That's pretty much what I was thinking but there is still a massive problem. You taught us about the proper courting behaviour and that would be great, except that I'm a goblin. If I followed that procedure, the press would be all over us and claiming I had chosen to live as a wizard..."

This was like a light coming on for Sirius as he finally grasped his godson's unique problem. "... and I'm assuming that there is a goblin procedure, which would lead to the opposite charge?"

Relieved that his godfather finally got it, Harry nodded. "It's like I'm boxed in and don't know what to do next. I want to tell Hermione how I feel about her but where would that leave us?"

"I think you should tell her, and explain the problem. There is a third option that you're forgetting about, though I'm sure Hermione will soon bring it to your attention." The look of longing in Harry's eyes meant Sirius couldn't leave his godson hanging a moment longer. "You're over-thinking what is basically a very simple problem, with an even simpler solution. If the magical and goblin options aren't available, surely there must be a muggle method for girls and boys to get together? Just ask Hermione to be your girlfriend, no magical or goblin courtship, nothing formalised. The only difference I can see happening between you two is that everyone would then know you were a couple."

"Do you think Hermione would be happy with that?"

"Harry, I think your young lady would be ecstatic with that. I've watched the two of you together and can clearly see this is something you've thought about. A word of advice from your godfather though, best friend to girlfriend is such a huge step. At this stage, you really need to take your time before making any further commitment."

"I'll be happy as long as Hermione agrees to become my girlfriend, anything else we'll deal with as time goes by. Since September, I've had witches coming on to me from all directions - and none of them can hold a candle to Hermione. She can make me feel happy and wanted just by holding my hand."

The smile now on Harry's face had Sirius giving himself the proverbial pat on the back, he should have known pride comes before a fall. His godson's next question brought him crashing back down to earth.

"Sirius, how do you feel about Henrika?"

Needing a moment to think about that, Sirius answered with a question of his own. "Why do I get the feeling there's more than idle curiosity behind that question?"

"As well as liking her very much, she also works for me - well the Lily Potter Foundation. When not teaching in Hogwarts, the professor will be dividing her summer holidays between working in Gringotts and coming on holiday with our group. If you are serious about each other, that's great. If not, then things could get really awkward if it all goes wrong."

Sirius was left wondering how Harry could be so insecure to be fretting over Hermione, yet mature enough to ask a question like that. Sirius hadn't even thought about the consequences Harry was mentioning, being happy at the moment just taking things a day at a time. It was though, time for total honesty with his godson. "Harry, after ten years in Azkaban, I'm not the same young wizard who went into that shit hole. Am I serious about Henrika, I honestly don't know. Could I become serious over one of the best things that's ever happened to me, that would have to be a big yes. I'm gonna take my own advice to you though and take time to work my feelings out. I honestly think if we decide this couldn't go any further, we'll both split as friends. That's really the best I can say at the moment."

His godson was smiling again so Sirius was left hoping he was two for two.

"We all like her, Sirius. I know that ever since Valentine's day, Hermione and Padma treat her more like a big sister or favourite aunt when we're not in class. I would hate for it to become awkward if you guys fell out."

"I'm pleased you approve, and there is someone else I would like you to meet. I finally tracked down my friend Moony. Remus was the Gryffindor prefect with your mum as well as being a marauder with

your dad and me. I was hoping we might invite him along for part of the summer, though the lunar cycle would decide which part. He's an expert in defence too, and could help keep up your training while you're away."

This didn't get the positive response Sirius was hoping for, leading him to wonder why. "You're not bothered about his little furry problem are you?"

"Goblins can't be infected by lycanthropy, to us they are just large wolves. I know I'm physically not a goblin, I was just trying to show we don't have the same prejudice against werewolves that wizards do. It was more the defence thing that bothered me. I don't mind learning from him during the holidays, but I want to keep Curse-breaker Weasley as our main defence tutor. Our lessons are hard but he always manages to get a bit of fun in there too, he really is a brilliant teacher."

Sirius decided to quit while he was ahead. "I have no problem with that, and also have a high opinion of Bill. Now we better get out of here, and get ready for the party tonight. You and I all sorted now?"

"I think so, just talking about it out loud has helped. Thanks, Sirius."

"No problem, Harry, that's what a godfather's for."

Both felt better for their chat as they headed out the room.

-oOoOo-

Minerva was as excited as anyone, currently waiting in the corridor, when she saw a door appear out of the stone wall, just because Harry had asked it to. Filius had told her of this phenomenon as he used the room to practice fencing with Harry and Hermione. Nothing could have prepared her though for the sight that greeted everyone as they entered this very special room. For a start, the room was circular - even though they weren't currently in one of the towers. The ceiling was constructed from multiple bolts of brightly coloured silk, the rainbow of different colours all dropping from a high, centre point - and creating the impression they were now inside a marquise. The silk from the ceiling continued down the walls and only stopped at the floor, reinforcing the tent-like impression. The massive chandelier hanging from the centre of the ceiling was throwing

flickering light onto all these colours and creating a wonderfully warm and welcoming atmosphere, aided by the intricately woven Indian rugs that were arrayed around the circumference of the room.

It was here that all the tables were laid out, in settings of fours and sixes. The centre of the room was left clear and only the soft music playing gave Minerva a hint of what it would be used for later. Minerva had camped in a wizarding tent with her family when she was a young girl but those, while clearly tents on the outside, were more like buildings on the inside. She couldn't remember ever seeing a stone room dressed to appear as if you were in an actual tent. This exciting illusion meant their evening was off to a flier, and they hadn't even sat down yet.

Excitement was certainly in the air, though two Gryffindor first year witches appeared to be heading for the hyper end of the scale. Padma grabbed her sister and Lavender by the arm and dragged them toward a table that seated six, being quickly joined by Hermione, Harry and Neville.

Minerva found herself sitting at a table set for four, with the other professors and Sirius, while the students gravitated toward tables with their housemates. Minerva was somewhat surprised to see Draco Malfoy in attendance tonight, there was no surprise that he, Pansy and the other two boys ended up sitting at a table for four - away from the other Slytherins.

There was a surprise though when Hermione stood up to say a few words.

"We're all here to celebrate the birthday of our friends, Padma and Parvati Patil. The plan is to have dinner, followed by dancing - until we have to leave for curfew. Let's get started by singing the traditional song. Happy Birthday to you..."

As everyone sang the song, a large birthday cake, complete with two sets of twelve candles already lit, appeared on the table the twins were sitting at. With one side dressed in Ravenclaw colours, and the other Gryffindor, the girls moved to their respective ends of the cake. When the song finished, Parvati and Padma blew their candles out to much cheering. That was also the sign for dinner to appear on all the tables, along with jugs of goblin ale.

When Hermione handed Padma her gift, the birthday witch was overcome. "Guys, I thought organising this party was my present - this is too much."

"Hey, remember our friend who thinks birthdays are the most important day of the year. I'm beginning to agree with him. Happy Birthday Padma." Hermione then handed over a present to Parvati. The Gryffindor witch tore the wrapper off to reveal a glossy magazine, the like of which she'd never seen.

"I know you liked the fashions in Harrods, and I've seen you reading Teen Witch Weekly from cover to cover. I got you a year's subscription to Vogue, it's a muggle fashion magazine."

Parvati's eyes were almost popping out her head at the full colour pictures of the latest muggle fashion. Neither she nor Lavender knew any of the people mentioned in the magazine, that didn't mean they wouldn't both be drooling over what these unknown women were wearing. Padma was also delighted with her gift, a boxed set of Jane Austen novels. She'd heard her friend say this was her favourite author, now Padma would get a chance to find out for herself.

Lavender gave both sisters make-up sets, something Parvati appreciated more than Padma. Neville had sought professional help with his gifts, he was sure Henrika wouldn't steer him wrong. Not even Parvati could equate the colourful jumper she received as a romantic gift, Padma's gold bangle though was simply beautiful - and very much appreciated by the birthday witch.

Harry had relied on Sirius for advice on this matter, giving Parvati a card with a voucher inside. The voucher stated I.O.U. One Shopping Trip, causing the Gryffindor to bounce up and down in her seat with excitement. The three friends were pleased that she'd at least manage to curb the annoying habit of emitting that ear-piercing squeal when she got really excited. With Susan and Hannah having birthdays between now and the first of September, both girls would be receiving the same voucher and they could do that shopping trip one day during the summer holidays.

Hermione and Padma would both be included, though neither needed a voucher. He was actually quite nervous watching his

friend open her gift. Her eyes lighting up with delight told Harry he'd got it right, and allowed him to release the breath he'd been holding.

"Oh Harry, I absolutely love it!" Padma then began to show the table just what the 'it' in question was. She was holding a bronze dragon skin shoulder bag that was styled decidedly more feminine than Harry's version of the item. Apart from the colour and size, there was also one other prominent feature that made certain neither would ever get their bags confused with each other. This particular model had 'PADMA' spelt in blue topaz into the flap that covered over the opening. That it was also charmed bottomless and featherlight meant Padma could use it anywhere, even places that didn't know blue and bronze marked Padma as a Ravenclaw.

As the meal progressed, both witches received small gifts from all their friends. McGonagall even provided one that had all of them cheering, she extended their curfew by an hour - providing they were all led back to their dorm by an adult. As the meal finished, plates of birthday cake appeared on each table. This was the moment Harry had been dreading, though neither he nor Hermione could see any way out of it. As the music increased in volume, Neville asked Padma to dance. Being the only other male at the table, Harry understood that asking the other birthday witch to dance was the only option available. He was gracious about it though, even while everyone there knew he actually wanted to dance with Hermione.

Having danced with Padma tons of times, Harry knew at once Parvati was a different witch. They may be physically identical but neither he, Hermione nor Neville had any trouble telling them apart. Dancing with Padma would be light, jokey and a lot of fun, Parvati on the other hand was all about invading your personal space as she tried to get as close as possible. Harry managed to keep smiling and chatting, while offering not one grain of encouragement. The closing bars of the song had him returning Parvati back to her seat, where Lavender's longing looks were politely ignored as Harry headed straight for Hermione. Thankfully, Dean and Seamus came over to ask both witches to dance. Ron seemed engrossed in conducting an experiment to discover how many pieces of cake he could eat without being physically sick, they were left to hope his experiment would be a success. Watching Ron Weasley throw-up wasn't anyone's idea of entertainment.

Harry was back dancing with Hermione in his arms, and everything in the world was all right again.

Pansy was dancing with Draco while running off at the mouth. Their situation inside Hogwarts had changed so much though that the Slytherin was forced to do her complaining at a whisper - a whisper so low that only Draco could hear her. "Look at that mudblood, hanging all over him. Who does she think she is? Standing up and speaking in front of McGonagall too, I don't know how much longer I can take this. I keep writing to my father about how bad Hogwarts is becoming, he just owl's back telling me to keep my head down. I hope your father is doing something about this situation?"

"If he is, then father won't tell me - and I certainly don't want to know."

Pansy almost caused them to stumble after hearing that, forcing Draco to explain a few home truths as they continued dancing. "If I get caught doing anything against Crow, I'll be barred from Gringotts. At that point, my life is practically over."

"Don't say that Draco..."

"It's true, and you would be the first thing to go. It's only the knowledge that I'll inherit when I come of age that's stopping your father cancelling our betrothal. We both know he wouldn't hesitate if my inheritance was gone. My own father would probably take action too. I would then need to marry, have a child and wait for them to come of age. With no fortune, and probably not even enough gold to put that child through Hogwarts, there won't be witches lining up to marry me. My father is far more likely to sire another heir himself, and totally disinherit me."

Pansy was almost in tears at the future Draco painted for them, knowing he had described both their parent's probable actions perfectly. Both fathers would be willing to wait the five years needed for Draco to inherit, but would instantly cut him off at the knees should that inheritance be lost for another generation. That Lucius was the one at fault here wouldn't save Draco, the Malfoy patriarch would take whatever action he deemed necessary to get the family fortune back under his control as quickly as possible. When Draco was no longer that option, he would be ruthlessly cast aside - and Pansy would find herself betrothed elsewhere.

"Now you see why I have to walk on eggshells while at Hogwarts. It will soon be summer and then we can get out of this place, let's just enjoy ourselves tonight. At least it's a good party."

Hermione was dancing with Harry so therefore it was a great party. She could tell something was bothering him though, and assumed it was what he'd been told earlier by Sirius. "Should I be getting worried here? Will blade-wielding Centurion Crow be making an appearance?"

"Oh I hope not. Malfoy is behaving himself and McGonagall's got her beady eye on Weasley, I'm not expecting any trouble tonight."

"If not tonight, then what's troubling you - or can't you say?"

"If I can't say what's on my mind to you, then I don't have any hope of getting what I want." Harry mentally took a deep breath before plunging right in. "I really like you, Hermione, but offering the official courtship that you deserve is not an option for me..."

Hermione actually finished his sentence for him, having already worked out this connotation back when Sirius taught them about courtships. "...because it would be reported as if you had chosen a wizarding future. Can I assume the goblin option is out, also for the same reason?"

"Yes, all I'm left with is asking if you would be my girlfriend..."

"YES!" Hermione followed this up by wrapping Harry in her arms and performing a quick kiss - their first kiss as boyfriend / girlfriend. This led to some cheering and whistling from those around them, forcing the now embarrassed but happy couple to retreat to their table.

Hermione was sitting close by Harry's side, their arms wrapped around each other with her head resting on his shoulder. "I don't need any more than that Harry, I'm really happy just being your girlfriend. My parents might freak out at anything more, at least until I'm a good few years older."

"It's just not the goblin way to do things so casually, Hermione, we're all about commitment and contracts..."



"Do you think I'm a casual girlfriend, Harry?"

"Absolutely not, and I would like to shout that to the world..."

"Stick to telling my mum and dad for now..."

They were interrupted by a delighted Padma, bending down and wrapping both of them in a hug. "This is such a wonderful birthday party, and now we even have another reason to celebrate. Two of my best friends finally getting together - I'm so happy for you both."

The happy couple were soon back on the floor dancing, leaving a relieved godfather with a wide smile on his face. Something his date noticed. "You knew Harry was going to ask her?"

"We spoke about it earlier. Harry wanted to offer Hermione more, but couldn't because of his circumstances. Sometimes I see Harry as a mini James, then he'll act in a way that is just so Lily. Sometimes though, Harry Crow is pure goblin and throws me totally. That lad is an enigma I need to solve to be a proper godfather figure, and your research for your book about goblins will surely help."

"Are you applying for the role of my unpaid research assistant?" Henrika had asked the question jokingly, but could see Sirius was not taking it as such. "What's the matter, Sirius?"

Deciding once more that honesty would be his best policy, Sirius spoke about what had been on his mind since this afternoon. "Your name came up in my discussion with Harry today, it felt like your brother was asking me what my intentions were toward you. You do know those four really like you?"

She was now nervous, wondering what had been said. Henrika just asked right out. "...and what did you tell your godson about your intentions toward me?"

"I told him the truth. Ten years in Azkaban has a way of changing you, in ways I'm still not comfortable with. After an incident at the Grangers over Christmas, I watched Harry and Hermione fall asleep together. They looked so content and comfortable, Emma just tucked them in and left them sleeping. I went to my room and cried myself to sleep, overcome with the sheer beauty of the scene. There

hasn't been much beauty in my life, and then I met Henrika Hobson - the single most beautiful person it has ever been my pleasure to meet."

She now relaxed in Sirius' arms as they continued slowly waltzing around the room. Whatever was coming next, it was not the end of their fledgling relationship - and anything else they could work at.

"So, what I'm trying to say is that, until I can get a grip on this different person that's inhabiting my body, I don't know what else I have to offer you. I realise you may have far better offers available..." A pair of incredibly soft lips pressing against his stopped Sirius saying any more.

"So, you just talked yourself into the position of an unpaid research assistant for the summer. Your duties will include following me around and taking notes, helping collate those notes - and making sure I don't get sunburn when we lie on these promised beaches to begin writing my book. There may have been a number of applicants for the post, but yours was the only one I seriously considered. This may just be a temporary position at the moment, but who knows what awaits us in the future. We both may find ourselves with permanent contracts a few years down the line?"

This witch really took Sirius' breath away. "When I said you were a beautiful person, I wasn't just talking about looks that could stop a bludger in flight. You have a beauty that comes from inside, and shines through everything you say and do. I've watched as you helped Hermione and Padma grow more confident in themselves, and getting Neville over his shyness and crush is nothing short of miraculous. That you're then prepared to spend time building a broken-down wizard back up to what passes as normal for me, I may have to stay close to you for many, many years."

Henrika's smile now rivalled the chandelier for brightness. "One step at a time, Sirius, one step at a time."

Minerva was delighted to spot two of her prefects when they all left the room.

"Hello professor, we were wondering why the first years were out past their curfew. That's why Penny and I were looking for them."

"Ten points to Gryffindor, Mr Weasley, and ten for you too, Miss Clearwater. I like my prefects to show initiative, and I'm very pleased with you two. Now, if you will escort your charges back to their houses, Professor Flitwick and I will see to the Hufflepuffs and Slytherins."

The groups of excited first years were soon being led away, but not before both Patil sisters had thanked everyone for coming.

-oOoOo-

That Harry and Hermione had added a light kiss to their saying goodnight and morning greeting hugs was the only noticeable difference to their behaviour, now they were a dating couple. Their friends didn't react any differently either, Hermione was usually on Harry's arm as they made their way around the castle. Both Harry and Hermione felt different though, moving their relationship from best friends to a dating couple had both of them grinning like Cheshire cats.

Even spotting a sour-faced Master Sharpshard, waiting with his father and Curse-breaker Weasley, couldn't spoil their mood. Master Sharpshard tried his best though. "One lucky scratch and your father, and the director, seem to think you can take me. After your father has completed his business, you and I are going to cross blades, Crow. That fancy little knife of yours won't save your arse today."

Harry opened the room, a room that now had a private area set up in one corner. That this area had an armchair and a sofa confirmed to Harry that the room understood what he wanted, even before he knew himself.

"Father, last night Hermione agreed to become my girlfriend. Can we include her in these discussions? I don't want to have any secrets from Hermione and hate to see her worrying that I might be heading into trouble. You told me my mum and dad shared everything, that's what I've always wanted too."

Both Barchoke and Hermione were taken aback by this. His father nodded though, mentally deciding just how much to tell them both as they made their way over to the seated area.

Bill started Padma and Neville working while the large goblin master of the blade stomped up and down, doing a passable impression of a bear with a sore head.

Barchoke stared into the young witch's eyes, desperately trying to impart the seriousness of what she was about to hear. "Hermione, what we speak of here this morning is effectively government secrets. Harry knows this, and must trust you implicitly to even suggest you sit in on this. I just want to make sure you understand, knowing these secrets can be a burden - a burden that can't be shared."

"I'll be able to talk about it with Harry though, that will be more than enough. Every time I see another task in his eyes, I worry over how I'll be able to help him. Now I'll not only know, but hopefully be able to help plan too."

"She can see right through my best stoic face, father, and then worries over what I might have to do. Unless it's something the director specifically doesn't want Hermione to know, I really don't want there to be any secrets between us."

Having made his mind up, and seeing his son had already done the same, Barchoke began to tell them why he was here. "Since this situation will obviously involve Hermione, I'm going to tell you both everything. Anything else though, I'll need to get permission from the director."

All three were happy with that so Barchoke began his explanation. Harry grasped at once what effect his father becoming an ambassador could have on wizard / goblin relations and was all set to say yes to everything when his father urged caution.

"They want to make this ball an evening dedicated to honouring the family who rid our country of Voldemort, with both your parents receiving posthumous awards that will keep their memories alive. The ministry hope to have a first year wizard and witch attending Hogwarts in September, entirely funded by the James and Lily Potter scholarship fund. They intend to support two new students every year for the next decade."

Hermione's hand was currently in Harry's, she felt his grip tightening as he heard this news. Her boyfriend's response then made her even prouder of him.

"Can we get the Lily Potter foundation involved too? Give the ministry the deserved credit for coming up with the idea, just provide the gold to extend the period to twenty years. I also think we need a panel to decide what new first years get chosen, this has to go to deserving cases. The last thing we want is rich purebloods saving money by having their children's Hogwarts tuition paid."

His father agreed with all of that. "I think a representative from the ministry, Hogwarts and possibly Sirius representing us until you're old enough should do, any more members and you would get nothing done. You never asked what they intended for you?"

"I assumed some award for me to stick on a shelf. As long as there are no statues, or anything stupid like that involved, I'll be fine."

Barchoke was so proud of his son, he decided to paint the full picture for him. "Fudge reckons that you attending this ball will give him the votes he needs to pull this off. For all his faults, we believe the minister has a very good chance of achieving this. Should I become ambassador, the director would like my son to follow in my footsteps. He thinks Lord Harry James Potter, Goblin Ambassador has a nice ring to it."

Harry so wanted to jump across the space between himself and his father, hugging him for all he was worth. Here was everything he ever wanted being made available to him. Instead of being faced with an impossible choice, he literally could have it all.

"I think Lord Harry James Potter, Assistant Goblin Ambassador has a much nicer ring to it. I would love the chance to work with my father for many years, before he graciously retired to spend time with his grandchildren."

Hermione didn't know that this was the 'goblin dream'. To raise your family to the point where your children were ready and able to take over the reins, while you then spent your retirement telling your stories to all the grandchildren they had provided you with. What she did know though was that even the thought of this outcome made Harry and his father very happy. She supposed Barchoke standing

and offering the centurion salute to his son was about as near to hugging each other as goblins got.

With the meeting now over, Barchoke had a word of warning for Harry. "Master Sharpshard has been taking a bit of a ribbing from myself and the director, he appears determined to prove your victory was a fluke. He doesn't know about your sword's abilities, and I had to promise the director a copy of this memory. I think Master Sharpshard got one over on Ragnok many years ago, and this is the director's form of payback. Just be careful, and make it quick."

Harry was reminded of the goblin saying that, even on the sunniest of days, a little rain might fall. There was no way any of them expected the torrent that was about to be unleashed.

A/N thanks for reading

A/N 2 Harry Crow is now my longest story, and this chapter fought me harder than the other 27 combined. There are parts of this I must have rewritten four times before I was satisfied with it, a very unusual occurrence for me. A big thank-you to all the readers who have given this story such tremendous support. Ask any author and they'll tell you the same thing - it really does help with the writing when you know readers are enjoying your efforts.

## Chapter 29

Harry understood at once what his father meant about ending this fight early, he would need to as Master Sharpshard certainly wasn't in training mode this morning. The object of today's lesson appeared to be showing Harry how much he still had to learn, and teaching him this lesson in as little time as possible. Without his magic, Harry doubted he would have lasted a minute.

He did have magic though, and it was time to use it. That he didn't have his knife in his hand lulled his mentor into a false sense of security, a security that was about to be trampled all over.

After Harry parried his first two attacks, Master Sharpshard then found himself standing there, not with a sword in his hand, but a bright yellow daffodil. When a web then shot from Harry's sword, the large goblin found himself suspended from the ceiling, a dozen feet off the ground.

Harry turned to see his father on the floor with laughter, his goblin stoicism shattered into a million pieces. Padma and Neville were cheering wildly at his victory but Harry didn't get to see any more as his vision was suddenly blocked by a mass of brown hair. Hermione arrived and hit like an express train, the scream of terror that she then produced was also as loud as any steam whistle.

Harry spun to see his mentor of the blade had easily sliced through his web, and was now using the cut section to swing down to the ground like Spider-Man. The goblin surprised everyone by using Harry's method of entrapment as a means of getting swiftly back into the fight. Master Sharpshard had a battle-axe in his hand and murder in his eyes, Harry barely had time to push Hermione out of the way before the goblin attacked with a ferocity his student had not faced before.

Hermione had not gone far though, and, seeing her boyfriend in terrible danger, didn't even think about her next move. Drawing her sword, she charged at the large goblin.

Master Sharpshard was not to be denied though, Hermione's attack was barely a distraction. Her blade was casually and harmlessly deflected away, before a violent kick into her midriff put her out of the fight.

Seeing Hermione flying across the room to land in a heap changed something inside Harry, the battleaxe slicing through his dragon hide tunic and cutting across his chest barely registered.

The shout of triumph died in the goblin's throat as his opponent ignored the inflicted wound, and was certainly not for stopping the fight after first blood had been drawn. Master Sharpshard now found himself facing a fully armoured and totally enraged Centurion Crow.

Any reminding Neville and Padma needed that Harry's father wasn't human was currently being provided in spades. Barchoke attacked the magical barrier that had reappeared in front of them like a wild animal - a wild animal that had a wicked dagger in its hand. He snarled, clawed, slashed and kicked to no avail though, the barrier held. Barchoke stopped as he witnessed the impossible, Hermione's bracelet began to cover her injured body in golden armour. This golden armour was still recognisable as his clan's design, but it should still be impossible. Hermione lying there unmoving after that kick to the lower ribs meant she couldn't be responsible for this, and Harry currently had his hands full.

Bill was trying everything he knew to get through the shield, and having as much success with his wand as Barchoke was with a blade. The trouble would appear to be that, as skilled and experienced as he was, his knowledge was nothing in comparison to Hogwarts. The castle was a few steps ahead of him at every turn. Noticing she was also helping her champion saw Bill lower his wand.

Master Sharpshard had never faced any opponent who was as quick or as strong as this centurion. The fact that both the blades he was now facing were also firing curses as they attacked, curses that were getting through his defences as he was forced to concentrate on not having a belly full of goblin steel, and the experienced warrior knew he was in trouble.

When the terrain started to literally alter beneath his feet, putting obstacles in his path as he was forced to back away from this golden maelstrom, the goblin knew he was in serious trouble.

The knut finally dropped when his left foot suddenly found a hole, a hole that wasn't there a second ago. This wasn't just trouble he was in - this was deep dragon shit.



When that very same hole suddenly closed, trapping his foot, the master of the blade was sure he'd fought his last fight.

Crow was fighting like a possessed demon and the goblin veteran was starting to feel the blood lost from his multiple wounds affecting him. He certainly felt the kick that lifted him right off the ground, ripping his boot apart as his foot was torn free. Landing on his back saw vines grow out the floor and start to hold him there. He didn't have time to worry about that though, an enraged centurion had a golden foot planted on his chest and a sword at his throat.

"Yield or die! I don't care which you chose, just do it quickly."

With the fight over, the barrier came down and Barchoke raced to his son. "Harry no, not like this. Hermione needs you, no one else will be able to get past her armour." Barchoke thought this was the only thing that saved the downed goblin's life, though being reminded who injured Hermione in the first place nearly saw Harry's blade driven home.

As his son headed toward Hermione, Barchoke knelt beside his long-time friend. "Tell me why I shouldn't just gut you where you lay? Maybe I won't even give you that release, my son has inflicted enough damage that you would bleed to death within an hour or so anyway. That might give you enough time to realise just how badly you've fucked-up. Even you must realise that killing him would start a war, a war our nation couldn't hope to win..."

"I would never have killed your son..."

"Once you attacked Hermione, nothing else would stop him. I'm surprised he let you live."

Barchoke let this sink in a moment before continuing, he needed to take action soon. The blood flowing from a few of the deeper wounds Harry had inflicted really would eventually kill the trapped fool.

"No one else can even find this room, yet Hogwarts opens its door for Harry - and changes the room to whatever he requires. You chose to fight the Hogwarts champion in such a room, a champion who's also a centurion, I'm surprised a bolt of lightning didn't shoot

out the ceiling to fry your arse. Even that though wasn't enough stupidity for the occasion, you then commit the almost fatal error of attacking his mate! Are you really so stupid or do you just have a Dumbledore complex? You're Master Sharpshard, therefore you can't be defeated. Guess again you delusional old fool, my son just cut you to pieces and dropped you onto your back."

Harry dropped to his knees beside Hermione, his armour had vanished and his bare hand now touched the golden lattice protecting his girlfriend. Their friends were also there, and the retreating armour allowed Bill to cast some medical diagnostic charms on the young witch.

"I'm seeing a couple of cracked ribs and some soft tissue damage, nothing major though moving will be painful until we can get it treated..." Bill stopped talking when it became obvious neither of the two were listening to him, all their attention was focused on each other.

Hermione had never been hit so hard in her life, the blow had taken all the wind - and fight - out of her. As she'd lain there, struggling to get a breath, Hermione had heard the noise of battle and the screams coming from their friends. It felt as if her heart had stopped, a heart that only started beating again when Harry knelt beside her. Seeing her boyfriend caused Hermione to forget all about her injury, Harry appeared to have been fighting inside a giant blender. His tunic was no longer black, having liberal patches of red splattered all over the front.

"Don't try to get up Hermione, your injuries..."

"...are nothing compared to yours. We need to get you to a healer."

"You need to get out of that tunic, Harry, I can't close those wounds through the dragon hide."

Hermione struggled to her feet and helped Harry remove his tunic, she couldn't stop the tears though as Bill administered the wizarding equivalent of first aid. He had a cut that reached from his right shoulder diagonally stretching fully across his torso to his left hip.

Neville offered his duelling robes, since Harry was now standing there in a pair of shorts.

Having Hermione holding his hand put Harry's world back onto an even keel, and made him realise there was something he had to take care of. His honour demanded it. "Hermione, there's something I must do first, I won't be long."

The room had released its grip and Barchoke now had Master Sharpshard sitting up. Barchoke was applying essence of dittany to the deepest of his wounds when Harry came over and knelt with his head bowed.

"Master Sharpshard, I await my punishment for the disrespect I showed my mentor. I used magic to make a fool of you, and for that I deserve to be punished."

Padma had retrieved her sword and Hermione was now sheathing her blade, she heard and understood every word Harry spoke. Remembering that Harry had said goblins didn't do pranks, but would treat such a thing as an attack, Hermione realised just how big a mistake they had made. Hogwarts motto translated as 'never tickle a sleeping dragon', Harry had practically punched one on the nose. Master Sharpshard may not breath fire but Hermione had no problem considering him every bit as dangerous as the emblem of Gringotts. She too had something that she should really do.

Kneeling beside Harry, and speaking in the goblin language, Hermione said her piece. "I too must apologise, Master Sharpshard. I had no reason to interfere with your training session, and will accept my punishment along with Harry."

"Let there be no more talk of punishment, deserved or otherwise. Crow, you fought like a demon and are a credit to the Centurion core. Miss Granger, I remember telling you that you had the heart of a goblin. Today, you proved that to be true on a few different levels. I think we should take a trip to the healers and then celebrate with some grog later. Since you are both far too young to appreciate that tippie, I will just have to drink your share too!"

The large goblin started to laugh, which quickly became a groan as Barchoke helped him to his feet.

"Crow, you now owe me a pair of boots too. I'll be sending your father the bill, it's not like you can't afford them." The laughter was again cut short as they began heading for the door.

-oOoOo-

Albus had heard from Minerva that Harry's father was going to be inside Hogwarts today, hence why he was loitering at the main entrance. Having watched their last meeting numerous times in his pensieve, he was forced to admit, only to himself, that Filius was correct in his summation of how that meeting had gone. Barchoke had come to Hogwarts in the hope they could work together, and Albus had backed him into a corner. Today, he intended to enquire if there was anyway they could sit back around the table and talk.

The headmaster didn't like using the term desperation but it was applicable here, he had been isolated from playing any part in Harry's life and was desperate for even the smallest crumb he could grasp from the current situation. Albus was prepared to allow practically any concessions in his quest to get back in the game. His problem though was Albus didn't think he had anything they wanted that could allow him to do so.

His thoughts and pacing were interrupted by the bedraggled group making their way down the stairs. Harry's father and William Weasley were supporting, more correctly carrying, the clearly injured large goblin between them. This wasn't what caught Albus' eye though, Harry and the Granger girl were clearly also injured. They were supporting each other, with young Longbottom and their Patil friend showing their concern by hovering next to them.

"What has happened here?"

"A training accident that our healers will soon remedy. We don't have time to chat, headmaster, so please excuse us." Barchoke was polite but everyone heard the steel in his tone.

Albus though was not for being brushed aside so easily, especially since here was an opportunity to earn himself some positive points. "We have a fully equipped infirmary here, and Madam Pomfrey is a highly regarded and widely experienced healer."

"While everything you say is true, you missed the part about mountain trolls paying a visit. We are heading for Gringotts, and I will owl the school should my son and Miss Granger require to remain overnight."

"You are of course perfectly entitled to take your son with you, but I must object to Miss Granger. The school would need the proper authorisation to release her into someone else's care..."

"You are correct, headmaster, though in error on whose authority is proper. The Grangers are at a distinct disadvantage because they are muggles. Since their daughter is a friend of the nation, they have trusted me to act on her behalf on matters connected with the wizarding community. Professor McGonagall has all the relevant information in Miss Granger's file."

From a perceived position of strength, Albus once more saw his argument crumble. It was desperation time again as he turned his attention to the obviously injured young witch. "Miss Granger, do your parents know what you're doing at this training, and how dangerous it can be?"

Unfortunately for Albus, it was another young witch who blew that argument to shreds.

Padma had watched helplessly while Hermione lay injured and Harry battled for his life, she'd cried buckets while holding tightly onto Neville. If that was goblin training, then Padma Patil wanted no part of it. Her two friends then bowing to the monster that had attacked them left her totally confused. That might need to be discussed later, but there was no confusion regarding just whose side she was on. Her two friends needed a healer and the headmaster was in the way, here was something she could do.

"Dan and Emma have actually watched us practicing, they know everything we do in these lessons - and so do my parents. My friends really need to get to a healer, headmaster."

As Albus stood aside, he clutched for one final straw. "Barchoke, when you return the children to Hogwarts, could I speak with you for a moment?"

Barchoke merely nodded as he led the party to the edge of the wards, Neville and Padma accompanied them that far, before racing to find Professor Hobson the instant the group portkeyed away.

-oOoOo-

The portkey landed the group in a part of Gringotts the wizarding public never got to see, that didn't mean it was empty though. Master Sharpshard was a well-known and unmistakable figure in the nation, seeing him being helped to the infirmary set tongues wagging. The gossip would reach all but the deepest recesses before the day was out.

This proved to be true in more respects than one, they had barely made the infirmary before the director appeared. Barchoke refused to leave until Harry and Hermione had been treated, only then did he accompany Ragnok back to the director's office.

-oOoOo-

Sirius was whistling a happy tune as he approached Hogwarts, the tune died on his lips as he spotted Henrika, Padma and Neville obviously waiting on him. His arm was around Henrika before the words were out his mouth. "What's happened?"

Both friends competed to tell the story.

"Harry pulled a prank on Master Sharpshard as they were duelling..."

"...he really didn't take it well and attacked Harry..."

"...the safety barrier went back up..."

"...but Hermione was outside it, since she'd ran to Harry..."

"...Harry pushed her to safety but Hermione drew her sword..."

"...Master Sharpshard didn't care, he just kicked her away..."

It was left to Neville to finish the story, Padma was still upset by that bit.

"Harry was furious, he activated his armour and really attacked Master Sharpshard. Harry ignored his own injuries and cut him badly, Harry finally kicked him to the ground and was ready to kill him. It was only the barrier coming down and his father getting over there that stopped him."

The concern was clearly evident in Padma's entire demeanour as she completed the tale. "Hermione has a few broken ribs while Harry was slashed right across his chest. If they're not coming back tonight, could you ask them to owl us that they're alright?"

Sirius immediately agreed to that, before hurrying off with Henrika to Gringotts.

Their apprehension was instantly quelled as soon as they were escorted into the goblin infirmary. Sirius thought if he could bottle the sense of relief he felt when he spotted his godson, sitting on his girlfriend's bed, then he would easily double the Black fortune. It wasn't just relief Sirius was feeling, the marauder was being swamped by a very confusing mix of emotions.

He wanted to hug his godson, holding back on the manly tears, yet at the same time he felt like shouting at him for getting into trouble. There was even a large dose of pride stirred in there too, pride that his godson had defeated the person who had dared to injure Hermione. Sirius was positive it couldn't be normal to feel all these emotions at the same time, he was worried his head might explode from this overload.

The two adults took a couple of moments to reassure themselves both Harry and Hermione were fine before Sirius asked for some answers.

"Hermione thinks I'm spending too much time with my godfather, she says I forgot goblins didn't do pranks."

While pleased to see Harry could joke about it, this was one notion Sirius wanted to knock on the head right away. "Oh, blame the poor mutt time is it, Miss Granger? I would say this was a pretty extreme reaction to a harmless prank."

Understanding that both Harry and Sirius were doing this to lighten the mood, Hermione played along. This was so much better than

watching Harry throwing up in a toilet. "I wouldn't call transfiguring someone's favourite weapon into a daffodil, before hanging them from the ceiling like some demented Christmas decoration, a harmless prank. Oh, and all this while supposedly fighting a duel."

Hiding his delight at how well these two were handling the entire incident, Sirius took it further still. "Why a daffodil, Harry. I don't think you have any Welsh blood, or is it a goblin thing?"

"Well, I didn't think a jaggy thistle would be appreciated, and shamrocks are used as the main ingredient in a goblin fertility potion - handing a shamrock to a male goblin is a deadly insult. Since only Hermione gets roses from me, that left a daffodil."

This was too much for Henrika, she couldn't restrain her laughter any longer. She wasn't alone as all four of them shared a laugh, maybe it wasn't such a horrid day after all.

There was something Harry wanted to say though and here was his opportunity. "Sirius, I don't know what my father has planned, but can we visit Hermione's before returning to Hogwarts? There's something we need to tell her parents, and I'd rather not do it in a letter."

That Harry had been holding Hermione's hand since they entered the infirmary wasn't even commented on, it had long been considered normal behaviour for these two. Sirius had a helpful suggestion for his godson. "Why don't you come back to my house? Neutral surroundings might make passing on your news easier - and Dan can't kick you out of my house for dating his daughter..."

This drew a squeal of indignation from Hermione, that didn't mean she thought it was a bad idea though.

Further down the ward, a large goblin lay behind privacy screens. The potions in his body may have been healing his injuries but the laughter was healing his soul. Master Sharpshard slipped into sleep with a smile on his face.

-oOoOo-



There was a distinct lack of smiles in the director's office as they studied Barchoke's memory of this morning. "Do you think he would have done it?"

"There is not one shred of doubt in my mind, just as we both know Sharpshard would have let him - rather than yield."

"Can you honestly say that Miss Granger is his mate? They're both so young and, biologically, neither is goblin."

"Biologically, my son is not a goblin. In his head and in his heart, Harry is as goblin as you or I. We define certain acts as being 'goblin' in nature, when have you ever seen anything more goblin than Hermione drawing her blade and springing to Harry's aid? She neither hesitated nor thought about using her wand, Hermione drew her sword and charged Sharpshard. I don't know whether it was Harry, Hermione or Hogwarts who produced that shield around her, it was certainly goblin in origin."

The director couldn't argue with any of that, he was still shocked at watching Sharpshard be defeated. He didn't know there were more shocks to come, Barchoke was by no means finished.

"As his father, I can see Harry has made his decision - it is one I'm very pleased with. I'm really confused though by one of yours, why did you order Sharpshard to attack my son?"

He may have just pushed the boundaries far beyond where he'd ever ventured before but Barchoke didn't care, he needed to know just what was going on here. Their very lives could depend on it.

"I've been friends with Sharpshard longer than either of us would care to admit. The friend that I know would have laughed his arse off at that joke, not attacked a student like a berserker. I looked into his eyes as my son was preparing to run him through, what I saw there gave your game away. What was reflected in his eyes wasn't anger but pride, pride in the achievement of his student. There is only one person from whom Sharpshard would except such an order, and they are currently in this room at the moment."

Slumping into his chair, Ragnok decided to come clean.

"I'm practically aligning the nation behind your son, I needed to know if he had the balls for what we're attempting. With Harry being so young, it was imperative we discovered just how he would react under extreme pressure. If he cracked today then we may have had to reconsider some of our options. That room certainly threw your son every advantage it possibly could, he still had to beat Sharpshard though - something I never thought I would live to see."

Barchoke was not some naive young buck, he'd expected the answer to be along these lines.

The director continued to justify his answers to this doubting father. "Fudge may need his summer ball to get this legislation through his ministry, this will certainly assist me do the same with the nation. Your centurion son defeating Master Sharpshard will be all over the bank before the end of the day, I distinctly remember predicting he could become a goblin hero. Sharpshard's orders were to provoke your son and see if he had what it took, or if he crumbled - this is beyond what I had hoped for."

Understanding he was putting his head on the chopping block didn't stop Barchoke, this needed to be said. If necessary, he was prepared to die for saying it.

"I understand, director, though I don't approve about not being consulted. After this lack of trust, I feel I have no other option but to say this. Should my son and I ever be played off against each other, I already know the choice I will make. I will use my own dagger to spill my guts all over your floor, setting my son free. I will give my all for the nation and fight side by side with my son, I will neither fight nor conspire against him."

The director tried not to let his shock show at that declaration, this was also not the time to rage and rant. His mind quickly added together the consequences of such an action, it would be nothing short of catastrophic. When a goblin took his own life in that manner, the location usually indicated at whom the act was directed. Harry was as devoted to his father as Barchoke was to him, leaving the grieving son's actions to that horrific outcome predictable. Crow had the means at his fingertips to declare himself a wizard, and the insider knowledge to seriously harm those he perceived as taking his father from him. Ragnok had to restrain himself as this was not a time for anger, rather truthful and frank discussion.

"If your suspicions about your son are correct, one day I hope we both see him bonded to Miss Granger. That marriage should see muggles, magicals and goblins in attendance, all standing there proudly - as equals. That, my friend, would be a scene worthy of depiction in the Hall of Heroes. As Director, I will do whatever I have to in my quest to make scenes like that the norm. As your Director, and I hope still your friend, I will state honestly I can't envisage any scenario where pitching you against your son would help the nation achieve that aim."

Barchoke's muscles had been tensed, expecting the swish of a blade to be the only warning he was about to lose his head. Hearing Ragnok's words allowed him to relax a little, he may still be breathing but he hadn't walked out of this office just yet. The director's next words gave him hope he might actually see Harry again.

Knowing these two were vital to his plans for the nation, Ragnok poured more soothing oil onto the choppy waters. "You have become a father and son team that is respected and revered throughout the nation, this can only help with our aims. What was Centurion Crow's reaction to our news?"

Having totally forgotten why he went to Hogwarts in the first place, Barchoke now completed his assignment. "My son was very enthusiastic, though he did suggest one change. He wishes to be Assistant Ambassador, and serve with his father..."

The director had his smile back in place after hearing that. "Exactly as I was saying, a father and son team that will reshape the country - and that suggestion has my full approval. I had always intended you to be beside your son, providing him with as much guidance as he needed. This is more than we dared hope for. The nation will see you take the lead, and the ministry will fall over themselves to accept - knowing that one day their boy-who-lived would succeed his father. Inform young Curse-breaker Weasley that the ministry deal is acceptable to us. We don't want to get too greedy at the start, it's more important that we actually get invited to the table first."

The director ordered grog to celebrate but Barchoke respectfully declined, stating he needed to get back to the infirmary.

Ragnok sat alone and sipped his drink, contemplating that age-old problem faced by every leader. Finding subordinates capable of assisting their leader with shaping the nation, without them being ambitious enough to want to overthrow that very same leadership. The director was positive that thought would never even enter Barchoke's mind. The senior accounts manager was more than capable enough, but his son could certainly never become director after him - so what was the point? The director had to concede though that he had found the proud goblin's limit, a limit it would be extremely foolish for him to exceed. Ragnok was no fool.

-oOoOo-

Eargit swooping into the great hall at dinnertime drew every pair of eyes. By the time Padma had untied the message, she was surrounded by their friends from all houses - each desperate to know how Harry and Hermione were.

"Hermione says they're fine and staying with Sirius tonight, Harry will be left without even a scar. Apparently the goblins are experts in dealing with injuries like that, though Master Sharpshard is having to spend the night in the infirmary. They should be back after breakfast, if her father doesn't kill Harry when they tell Hermione's parents they're dating. I think that last bit is meant to be a joke, it's hard to tell with those two."

The story of what had happened had soon spread throughout the castle, Padma and Neville ensuring the story was mostly true - Harry didn't want it known that his sword was magical. When everyone assumed he cast the spells using his knife, they were quite happy just to let them continue with that assumption.

"I can't believe Hermione charged that massive goblin with her sword..."

"I can't believe Harry put him in the infirmary..."

It was Neville who tried to put their friends straight. "Guys, he was attacking Harry. What did you think Hermione was going to do - just stand there and watch?"

Padma knew Hermione and Harry better than any of them, neither of her friends' reactions had surprised her in the slightest. Scared the shit out of her - yes, surprised - no.

"When Master Sharpshard hit Hermione, Harry got really angry. Trust me on this, you never want Harry really angry with you." Padma was preaching to the converted but her words reached further than she thought.

There were still witches in the castle who thought the boy-who-lived was fair game. Boyfriend / girlfriend meant nothing to them, it didn't offer any protection the way a formal courtship would. Padma's words though reminded them of something, when you hunt big game, sometimes you got mauled. Caution would have to be the name of the game, with the smarter witches willing to adopt a wait and see philosophy. The hunt wasn't over until the boy-who-lived married.

Albus didn't have to wait, a certain witch headed right for him. Minerva had also received an owl and, as requested, passed a message on to the headmaster. "Barchoke will be bringing both students back tomorrow morning, and has agreed to speak to you then. What are you up to, Dumbledore?"

This was the first bit of good news he'd had in months, Albus just ignored Minerva's lack of respect and answered her truthfully. "Nothing more than a chat. Our last meeting didn't end too well, I just want to enquire if there is any way we can move on from there. Do you want to sit-in on the meeting?"

"I have classes all morning, otherwise I would."

Albus merely nodded, already knowing that fact before he made the offer. Things may finally be moving in a positive direction and Albus Dumbledore just might get himself back in the game.

-oOoOo-

Neither Dan nor Emma paid any attention to the old world elegance of the townhouse they now found themselves in, Bill had said the kids had been injured and they wouldn't settle until they saw both were fine with their own eyes.

Hermione found herself gently scooped into her mother's arms, before being passed onto her father. Harry found himself replacing Hermione in Emma's arms, a sensation he could definitely get used to.

Dan was first to recover, and demand some answers. "Hermione, you said you were going to be careful with that sword. Charging into battle with it doesn't sound like being careful to me. What the hell happened?"

"The situation got out of control incredibly fast. I just wanted to help Harry, and anyway, we're both fine."

They then faced a question from Emma, a question they both knew would be coming. "Why didn't you come home? That had us thinking there was something wrong."

It was time to face the music so Harry jumped right in. "Well, this way Dan can't throw me out the door when he hears our news. At Padma's birthday party, I asked Hermione to be my girlfriend."

"...and I said yes!"

Both parents could have easily guessed their daughter's answer, so Hermione's declaration wasn't strictly necessary. Emma's squeal of joy and her hugging both Harry and Hermione left Dan needing to be even more careful with his choice of words.

"Sirius, could you point me in the direction of somewhere I could have a quiet word with your godson?"

The marauder tried to keep a straight face. "Go right up the staircase and you will find the library on your left..." Sirius did have an excuse to laugh though as both Ravenclaws showed their true colours.

"You have a library?" Was asked in unison.

"Come with me, Harry, and we'll see if we can find it."

Hermione's quick kiss on the cheek for luck probably didn't help her dad's temper, but meant Harry followed Dan up the stairs with a smile on his face. He'd started the day off facing an enraged Master

Sharpshard, compared to that, well - Dan didn't even have a weapon on him.

When Dan saw Harry's attention drawn to all the books, he had to remind himself this was not a normal young boy he was dealing with. This lad was a goblin centurion, Harry had already dispatched a troll and defeated his fencing tutor in defence of Hermione. He was hardly likely to be intimidated by her dentist father, especially since Harry didn't even know what a dentist was. Dan still intended to make his point though.

"I was led to believe you were not looking for a girlfriend, at least until a certain dark lord was no more. Can you tell me what changed? I'll tell you here and now, I think you are both far too young to be even considering becoming more than best friends."

"Hermione and I are still best friends, Dan, this was more about telling each other - and everyone else - we intend it to be more when we're older."

Hearing this was easing Dan's concerns, but he still wanted to know more. "Why now, Harry, why not wait a year or two?"

"Your daughter is beautiful, incredibly smart and so much fun to spend time with. To be perfectly honest with you, Dan, I was terrified that some other boy might sneak in and steal Hermione away. As I said to Sirius, I don't think I could handle that."

For the first time today, Dan saw a vulnerable side to Harry. He didn't think there was a snowball's chance in hell that his daughter would be interested in any other boy. Then again, from Harry's point of view, Dan could now see how he reached that decision - and there was that same snowball's chance that his daughter would say no to being his girlfriend.

Harry had more to say though, "There are things happening that will see Hermione and I front page news again. I can't say what exactly just now, but it won't be dangerous and we hope you and Emma will be there with us. Saying she's my girlfriend might divert some of the jibes that come her way from being on my arm."

"Does this mean that you're now courting? I thought that procedure meant I was supposed to be consulted first?"

"I couldn't use wizarding or goblin etiquette, that would be seen as me reaching my decision. That's why we're now boyfriend and girlfriend. Other than that, very little has changed between us."

It was a relieved father who grasped that last comment and held it close. Something else bothered him though. "We were there when Sirius explained wizarding courting behaviour, I take it the goblin version is different?"

This actually brought a blush to Harry's cheeks but he stared Dan in the eye and told him the truth. "I told you goblins only have one mate, they also apparently know when they've met their mate. My father described it as a male and a female becoming very close really quickly, and then never wanting to be apart. Because of this, they always bond within a year of meeting. If they don't, they wouldn't be considered true mates."

The implications of that hit Dan like a punch in the gut. "That would mean..."

He couldn't actually say the words, so Harry finished it for him. "...it would mean Hermione and I marrying in August - something neither of us are anywhere near ready for."

Again Dan clutched onto that last sentence. Hermione having a boyfriend at twelve suddenly didn't seem as bad when compared to becoming a bride. He also remembered what Hermione said about cultural differences between her friends, and this one was a doozy. Keeping his calm, Dan asked what he thought was a pertinent question. What he really wanted to do was rant and rave about a culture that would see children married before their teens.

"Do goblins usually find their 'mates' so young?"

"Goblins mature later than wizards, which certainly helped me at school. It would be considered 'unusual' for a goblin under sixteen to discover their mate."

He was again amazed at how the four of them were such good friends, with such wildly different backgrounds. Dan was also delighted he'd heeded Hermione's advice and not steamed right in



there pushing his values at Harry, only to discover he had been jumping to conclusions.

"So, just to make sure I've got this right, you and Hermione are just a normal boyfriend and girlfriend - normal to Emma and me that is."

"I hope Hermione will be my girlfriend for a good few years, is that alright with you?"

Considering the other options, Dan stood and offered his hand. He would just have to wait and see what those years brought.

A voice both recognised shouted from outside the door. "Daaad, you finished yet? You're hogging the library!"

He wasn't even going to begin to analyse why his daughter was more concerned about getting into the library, rather than worrying about the talk her father was having with her boyfriend. Dan decided to take this as a good sign, until someone told him otherwise.

"We'd better move, Harry, you don't want to get between Hermione and her books."

"Padma and I are just as bad, I can see us all spending some time here over the holidays."

Hermione raced in, grabbed Harry's hand and dragged him toward the shelves full of unread books. Dan headed off to find his wife, hoping she had a better handle on this than he did. He had no intention of mentioning the goblin form of courtship to anyone - ever!

A/N thanks for reading.

## Chapter 30

Bill was pushing his mother's cooking around his plate, rather than eating it. If this wasn't a sure sign he had something on his mind, ignoring Ginny's questions was a dead giveaway.

"Bill, you haven't been listening. I wanted to know about the party last night, did Ron behave himself?"

"Sorry Ginny, just had a very busy day. I never actually got to talk to Harry and Hermione today, Master Sharpshard was there and put both of them in the Gringotts infirmary."

He was still playing with his food before the fact that there was now total silence at the Weasley dinner table hit home. Bill lifted his head to see the other three occupants staring at him, obviously wanting to know more. "Everyone thought the duel was over but Master Sharpshard came back at Harry. Hermione then got involved before finding herself kicked out of the fight. This enraged Harry, and only his father managed to stop him killing Sharpshard. Both Harry and Hermione were fine after treatment, and heading to spend the night with Sirius."

His sister's eyes were almost popping out her head as she asked the question they all wanted to know the answer to. "Would Harry really have killed him?"

"I think so, anyone harming one of those girls is going to find themselves in serious trouble. You would really need a death wish to attack Hermione. I did hear she's now his girlfriend, apparently he asked her last night at the party."

Bill was carefully gauging Ginny's reaction to this news, and was pleased with what he saw. While clearly not happy to hear Harry officially had a girlfriend, there was no running off to her room in tears. Arranging that meeting in Kings Cross was now paying dividends as Ginny had the memory of their offered friendship to cling to. His mother then tried to change the subject.

"Those goblins are working you too hard, Bill, we hardly get to see you."

"The goblins don't pay you gold to sit about and do nothing. Which reminds me, can I have a word with you, dad? There's something we need to discuss."

Father and son took a stroll through the orchard, ensuring they couldn't be overheard. "The goblins are agreeing to everything, and the timescale too. There's one thing I really need to talk about though, Barchoke has offered me the position of his assistant. How would you feel about that, us sitting on the opposite sides of the table?"

This actually caught Arthur on the hop, making him stop and think. "That would really depend on the motives behind this move. I thought your main duties were to train Harry?"

"Dad, this morning I watched a boy become a man. Harry is a really focused and driven individual, with power and skill to back those up, he's an absolute joy to teach. Today I saw him add a ruthlessness to that mix that scared the life out of me, and also filled me with hope. For the first time I actually believed that young man could fulfil the destiny that's been placed on his shoulders."

"What does this have to do with you becoming Barchoke's assistant?"

This drew a smile from his eldest son. "There's no hidden goblin plots, dad, though I think Barchoke is hoping you and I can still work behind the scenes so we all get what we want out of this. I have been offered a five year contract, after which just about any job I want in Gringotts will be mine for the asking. This is a fabulous opportunity and Barchoke has allowed me to tell you the reason behind this offer. After five years, they're planning on Harry taking over from me - eventually he would become the ambassador."

The implications of this hit Arthur like a bludger in the gut, but one massive question remained unanswered. "Will he be taking the position as a wizard or a goblin?"

"I'm pretty sure that will still be Harry's decision. This way though, his father is providing the opportunity for him to have it all. There's a whole wide world out there, dad, and Barchoke seems determined his son will get to experience most of it before he has to make that choice. He has Sirius teaching him wizarding culture, the Grangers

are muggles and Harry's grown very close to them. Harry has also been raised as a goblin so he was facing an impossible choice. My own reading of this is that they are searching for a compromise that will satisfy everyone - including the ministry."

This news would have Fudge drooling, bring up another problem for Arthur. "How much of that can I tell the minister?"

"Barchoke knew you would ask that, and offered a compromise. You can say that goblin culture is based around sons stepping into their father's shoes, you can also say that this is one part of their culture Barchoke is hoping his son retains - whatever decision Harry makes on just where his future lies."

Arthur was certain the minister would easily decipher the message being sent, this could be an enormous coup for the ministry - and the goblin nation. It was time to uphold his end of the bargain.

"Fudge is really playing this cleverly, I honestly didn't think he had it in him. He's going to contact Sirius about the ball to honour the Potters, and enlist his help for choosing just who will receive the Potter Scholarships. He's proposing the panel consist of Amelia Bones, representing the ministry, Minerva McGonagall as Hogwarts representative and Sirius for Harry."

Neither father nor son could see there being any objection to that trio. The minister's planning was even more considered and structured. "When all the excitement of this announced event is at its peak, and people are scrambling for tickets, the minister is going to approach the Wizengamot with his proposal. By citing that the entire event nearly didn't happen, due to outdated means of communication between the ministry and Gringotts, he thinks that will swing a large proportion of the votes he needs behind him. Letting details of the proposed arrangements with Gringotts slip to the Prophet should swing some more. Harry attending the ball will be the cherry on top, and should finish the job."

Like his father, Bill didn't think Fudge was so politically astute. He had even more good news to pass on. "Harry wants the scholarships to run for twenty years - and is going to pay for the extra ten out of his own vault. He's quite happy for the ministry to take the credit, Harry really thinks it's a wonderful idea and will back it with his own gold. He's also prepared to give a short speech at the

ball, praising the ministry for the scholarships - and giving his full backing to the minister's goblin proposal. We could even have him hint that the ambassador's job would certainly be one that would interest him in the future."

Arthur Weasley felt as if his ship had finally come in, and he wasn't talking about this year's bumper crop of apples. With Fudge's plan, and Harry's public backing, that big promotion was practically in his pocket.

No longer would his children attend Hogwarts wearing hand-me-down robes and old family wands. Molly hadn't been pleased when their two oldest children moved away to make careers for themselves, he and Bill were just about to drag the Weasleys up amongst Britain's most prominent families. He couldn't wait to see his daughter's face when he could tell her she would be going to the Ministry Summer Ball, and sitting at the same table as Harry. Arthur was really looking forward to going to work tomorrow.

He also wondered how much more ministry / goblin policy would be decided while he and his eldest son took an evening stroll in the Weasley orchard.

-oOoOo-

Barchoke entered the great hall of Hogwarts with Henrika by his side, and was delighted to see the welcome Harry and Hermione received as they walked in front of them. Padma currently had an arm around each of them, and didn't look like she would be letting go anytime soon - despite assurances both her friends were fine. Barchoke had been watching fights for decades, and his heart was still in his mouth when Hermione drew her blade and charged. It wasn't surprising then that their friends had been terrified.

Albus Dumbledore smiling at you was also a terrifying sight. The headmaster was probably attempting to appear jovial and harmless, his eyes betrayed him though. It was more the smile of a tiger, just before it pounced on its next meal. Barchoke knew though that when you removed a tiger's claws and teeth, what you were left with was a big pussy.

"Good morning, Barchoke, I was very pleased that you agreed to meet with me. Will we head up to my office?"

"Since she has no classes until after lunch, do you mind if Professor Hobson accompanies us?" Dumbledore's expression clearly portrayed that he did, but Barchoke had any objections covered. "The professor is working on a book exploring the habits of our nation, we are trying to dispel some of the more unsavoury myths that exist about goblins. I feel having her observe relations between wizards and goblins will surely help with this academic endeavour. As one of my son's private tutors, she has access to all of Harry's file. We won't be speaking about anything this morning that she isn't already privy too."

With that, Dumbledore really couldn't refuse.

When they were all seated in his office, Albus got the ball rolling. "I have been reviewing our previous meeting, and I would like to start this one by saying I was wrong. I have been watching as you have done exactly as you stated, ensuring your son has a well-rounded knowledge of wizarding, and even muggle society, to compliment his goblin upbringing. Harry really is a son you can be proud of."

Seeing that this tactic had knocked both his guests back on their heels, the headmaster continued in the same vein. "Knowing the decision he has to make, this would be a large enough burden for any youngster to bear. Harry though has even more hanging over him, with Voldemort and the prophecy to be taken into consideration too. I know we've had our differences in the past but even you must admit, I have a wealth of knowledge and experience. I would like to place that knowledge and experience at Harry's disposal. I'm making this offer since everyone in this room has the same aims. We want to see Voldemort defeated once and for all, and to let Harry make the choice that's right for him."

Both Henrika and Barchoke were surprised by this charm offensive, surprised but not fooled. They knew Dumbledore's ultimate goal was to have influence over Harry, this switch of tactics didn't change that fact. The goblin had certainly come prepared, it was only Barchoke's delivery that now needed to be altered.

"While I can't help but agree about your experience and knowledge, and certainly on the goals you expressed for my son, the issue standing between us remains the same. A matter of trust, something kind words and reaching agreement on common goals doesn't

address. Without that trust, I fail to see how we can progress from our current position."

As long as there was no shouting and storming out his office, Albus considered himself still to be in the game. "I realise that trust is something that needs to be built slowly, and I'm certainly not so naive as to expect your full confidence anytime soon. Your son though will be at Hogwarts for another six years, my hope is to earn that trust within this timeframe."

Now that he had Dumbledore clearly interested, Barchoke placed the bait in his trap. "I too agree trust must be built slowly, yet every building needs a strong foundation. There is a piece of information I lack, information I am also sure you have. In exchange for this information, I would be willing to bring you into our horcrux team - supplying all the details we have on this subject. I see this as being the basis of how we move forward, hopefully to one day achieve the level of trust between us you obviously desire."

As tempting as that offer was, Albus knew of the goblins' well-deserved reputation for getting the better of any bargain. The information they wanted from him must be vital, and therefore probably worth more than was being currently offered. "I would like to hear just what this information is you are looking for, before committing myself any further."

"As you said headmaster, experienced and knowledgeable - I expected no other answer. We know about the prophecy Madam Trelawney made to you, we even know the where and when it was made. The information we are looking for is how that prophecy ended up in the hands of Voldemort. Madam Trelawney is of course blameless, since a true prophecy is not remembered by the seer who predicts it. That only leaves us with one other name..."

The canny goblin didn't think Dumbledore could have looked more shocked if he'd dunked the headmaster in hot grog, and then had a dragon breathe on him to singe the old wizard's beard off.

"Alas, what you ask, I am sworn by oath never to reveal. Surely there must be something else?"

Barchoke shook his head, but in a manner that suggested this wasn't quite over yet. "I certainly didn't expect an answer today, this

is clearly something that will require some thought. You mentioned a timescale earlier and I think that's what we need here. Let's settle on Harry's birthday, I'll make a point of seeing you on that day. If you are still unable to provide the answer, then we will talk of this no more. You must understand though, your options for assisting my son or I in anything would then be nil. Good day headmaster."

Dumbledore barely noticed them leaving, still shocked at the question Barchoke asked. A quick glance at the master timetable showed Severus free after lunch, he would send for him then. What a choice he was now faced with, protect Severus or gain an 'in' with the team taking the fight to Voldemort - a team Harry was a massive part of. Thankfully, he had until the end of July to reach a decision.

-oOoOo-

"Well, what did you think?"

They had just passed the gargoyle guarding the headmaster's office when Barchoke asked the question. It took Henrika a moment to consider her answer. "I know I missed something, I just can't figure out what it was. You left that office far too easily, because I can see how important this answer will be to you and Harry."

A throaty chuckle answered the veela. "There is a saying wizards are fond of, but I can assure you it is goblin in origin. There is more than one way to skin a dragon, and I'm gambling on Dumbledore laying himself bare before the end of the day."

"Ok, there was an image I could have done without. Can I ask why I was in that office?"

"A distraction, and because Harry has herbology. I dangled a carrot in front of Dumbledore's nose, but that's all it was. Harry would refuse point blank to work with the headmaster, he wouldn't even let me enter that office alone with Dumbledore. He trusted you to watch my back, Harry really has a high opinion of you, Henrika."

This brought a smile to the veela's lips. "Yes, Sirius told me Harry was quite protective when asking what his godfather's intentions were toward me. He said it was like being threatened by my brother."



This certainly drew an amused laugh from Barchoke. "I fear any wizard going anywhere near Padma is in for a much rougher time of it - unless that wizard is Neville of course!"

"I get the feeling those two are just really good friends. It might turn to more later but they just don't have the feel of a couple to me. Harry and Hermione on the other hand..."

"I am well aware of my son's feelings for that particular young witch, it pleases me more than I can say that Hermione returns those feelings. What she did yesterday was incredibly stupid, and yet took astonishing courage. Hermione must have known she stood no chance, yet she charged in there regardless. I honestly think the result would have been different had she not. Now, if you will inform Harry at lunch that everything went well, I shall head off back to Gringotts."

The goblin was out the castle before it dawned on Henrika that Barchoke hadn't mentioned just how Dumbledore would be skinned. Henrika genuinely liked the little goblin but still had to stop herself counting her fingers every time they shook hands. Barchoke was one of the cleverest and yet most devious person she had ever met in her life, who would probably take her counting those fingers as a compliment.

-oOoOo-

Albus once more found himself having to provide a pick-me-up to someone in his office, Severus currently looked as if his legs wouldn't support him.

"I think you are overreacting, Severus, I'm sure they would understand your point of view..."

"...and I think you are getting senile. The only point they understand is on the end of those blades, these are goblins we are dealing with. We've both seen what Crow can do if he gets close enough, no wand can stand up to his blades. Black spent ten years in Azkaban, there will be no forgiveness or understanding from that quarter either. Now tell me again how I am over-reacting?"

"Both Sirius and Harry would surely take into consideration you were a close friend of Lily's, and had no way of knowing the Potters would

be the ones referred to in the prophecy. Harry is much more like his mother in that respect, he thinks before he acts."

"Yes, but he also has Lily's temper. You told me he cut that big goblin to pieces, and we both know Filius regards him as practically a god with a sword. Our charms master fell off his chair yesterday when you told that story."

Dumbledore tried to pacify his potions professor. "This is not something that needs to be decided today, we have time to think this over and develop a strategy."

Severus finished the glass of brandy, his strategy already formed. He knew Albus would betray his grandmother to get close to the boy. However he dressed it up, Severus would be served up for the greater good of Albus Dumbledore. The only decision Severus needed to make was whether he could hold off until the end of term before slipping quietly away, or if he needed to make a run for it before then.

It was four weeks to the exams, and then another three before the students took the express back to London. His preferred option would be to skip the country the next day, hopefully being far away before anyone realised he might not be coming back. If he did a runner now, missing a few meals, never mind classes, would immediately set tongues wagging.

With this dilemma running through his mind, Severus left for his quarters. Albus was so concerned about his friend, he accompanied him part of the way. Neither noticed the bug that landed on the back of Dumbledore's hat, and hitched a free ride out the headmaster's office.

Rita was certain she had just earned her advance on Dumbledore's expose, this latest revelation ensuring her book would be explosive. Holding Barchoke from taking action against Snape might be her biggest problem, but the goblin was wise enough to know this might just set Dumbledore's alarm bells ringing. At the moment, the headmaster had no idea he was being investigated - and it was certainly in their joint interest that he remained ignorant until just before publication.

Yes they might want Snape to pay, but not at the cost of their main target being forewarned. By the time they announced the publication date to the world, Dumbledore could call in all the favours he wanted. The book would be printed inside Gringotts, and he was all out of favours there. Even if they were reduced to selling the book by owl order, Rita was confident they would still sell every copy they could print.

Rita now considered her sacking from the Prophet as one of the best things that ever happened to her. She may have entered the room in Barchoke's pocket but she was leaving on top of Dumbledore - that was okay in her book.

The reporter turned author had even settled on a title for her first book, 'The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore' had a nice ring to it. The ring of the tills, filling up with all that lovely gold she was going to earn.

-oOoOo-

The week had flown for the friends, their only difference was now they had - at Hermione's insistence - allocated an hour a day for exam revision. Master Pitslay asking Harry to stay behind after potions blew their routine week right out of its nice stable orbit.

Hermione had of course stayed with Harry. Though Rowena Ravenclaw's charm meant she could still understand spoken goblin, the written word really was gobbledygook to her. Harry's outburst as he read the hand-delivered note from his father indicated this indeed must have been bad news.

"Harry, I'm quite happy to admit the goblin language has more swear words than probably any other in the world, even if a few of those descriptions are biologically impossible. Can you calm down enough to tell me what the problem is?"

"It's only biologically impossible when certain appendages are still attached to a body. Slicing them off opens a whole different world of possibilities, and I've just discovered someone I would like to take my blade to."

She wrapped her arms around him, hoping to provide some comfort - and buy some time for her boyfriend to consider his next move.

Hermione didn't even want to think about Harry's last answer. "Sometimes I can forget you're a goblin, not for long though. What has got my centurion so fired up?"

Not a flicker of humour, all Hermione could see was rage. She knew this was bad, she just didn't know how bad - yet.

"We always thought Sirius Black had told his master the prophecy, and then served the Potters up on a plate. Discovering that my godfather wasn't a death eater, and didn't even know the prophecy - only that there was one - blasted that theory to smithereens. He was only told of the prophecy's existence as my mum and dad were forced into hiding, because Voldemort was already hunting them. That leaves the massive question - who told Voldemort the prophecy?"

This question set Hermione's thoughts off at warp speed. "This would be top secret, so no one at the ministry would know. I read that a true seer doesn't remember a genuine prophecy, only the people that are there when it's made will hear it. If your mum and dad didn't tell their best friends, who does that leave?"

"The prophecy was made to Albus Dumbledore..."

"Oh my God! Do you think he would tell Voldemort?"

"Directly, no. Would he get Snape to pass on the message...we hope to find out. Either way, it was certainly Snape who told Voldemort. He's the reason my mum and dad are dead, and why Neville has to visit St Mungo's to see his. That prophecy could have applied to two boys, both of whom lost their parents over it."

Hermione's tears actually calmed Harry down more effectively than any words could. The very thought that he had been responsible for those tears had him wrapping his girlfriend in his arms. "Hush now Hermione, I'm sorry. I'm not going to go charging after Snape - well, not right away."

"Oh Harry, I want to go charging after that bastard myself. I am so angry, yet so sad at the same time. What are we going to do about this?"

Hermione's use of 'we' actually put a smile on Harry's face, it might be considered a wicked smile, but it was still a smile.

Master Pitslay was merely an observer, and his observations would be getting reported back to Gringotts. Harry might have obeyed an order from his father not to immediately attack the Hogwarts potions master, but he couldn't think of anyone other than Miss Granger who could have talked him out of it.

"My father is working on bringing Dumbledore down, that's where he dug up this information. If we act on this, the headmaster is bound to put two and two together. My father currently has enough information to do him great harm, but, in a few months, he hopes to be able to destroy him. If Dumbledore gets wind of this investigation, we run the risk of him going all out to wreck the new goblin agreement. We have to take the chance on losing Snape to put Dumbledore's head in the dragon's mouth."

She could hear, and actually feel, what this decision was costing her boyfriend. Harry was as tense as a drawn bowstring. "Where does Snape's salary get paid to?"

This drew a chuckle from the goblin potions master, reminding both students he was there.

"I'm beginning to think you are part goblin, Miss Granger. That was thinking worthy of a friend of our nation. All Hogwarts salaries, except for Dumbledore's are paid directly into their Gringotts vault. There is already an alert placed on Snape's vault. Should he arrive in Gringotts, Harry's father will need to make a snap decision. If Snape is attempting to disappear, we can help him with this endeavour."

Hermione was confused at this, until she saw Harry's broad yet scary smile - now she was really flummoxed.

"We can make his wish come true, Hermione. He wants to disappear, no one will ever find him in a goblin cell. It will depend whether he tries to access his vault, or decides it would be safer just to skip the country. To flush out who was responsible for running to Voldemort with the prophecy, my father had to let Dumbledore know we were looking for this person - which is why the headmaster would know we were on to him if I suddenly attacked Snape.

Dumbledore said he would need to think about it, and has until my birthday as a deadline for his decision. If Snape runs before we're ready to take down Dumbledore, I may have to let him. The agreement with the ministry is far too important to risk for revenge."

"A very mature decision, Centurion, and I believe the right one. Your father will certainly agree with me, though insisted you still be given the choice."

"Please thank my father for me, Master Pitslay. I'm a centurion and swore an oath to the nation, I have to put personal revenge second to that oath. My father has outlined the timescale here, and I can wait that long. Between training, exams and then our holidays, I'm sure Hermione will do her best to keep my mind off it."

"You forgot to mention the ministry ball in your honour, just the biggest social event in all of Europe this summer."

"No I didn't, and the ministry will be making official contact soon. It's less than three months to my birthday, and these things usually take longer to arrange than that."

The two then headed off to Ravenclaw Tower. They intended to eat their lunch in Harry's room, since neither was ready to sit in the great hall with Snape and Dumbledore at the moment. With herbology next, they may have control of themselves enough to eat dinner with their friends. Making an excuse for missing lunch would be easy, skipping dinner too would see questions asked.

-oOoOo-

There were questions being asked the next day when Sirius entered the great hall, this in itself was not unusual as they had lessons with him every week at this time. What was unusual, and the reason for all the questions were the two people who accompanied him. Minister Fudge and Madam Bones.

Albus strode down to meet them, using all his experience to hide his trepidation. He couldn't see anyway this would be good news. "Sirius I was expecting, Cornelius, Amelia, to what do we owe the honour of this visit?"

"The ministry are considering a new incentive that will affect Hogwarts, we came today to talk with Minerva about lending her expertise to this venture."

He wasn't sure whether to be relieved or insulted at the minister's words, Albus intended to at least pretend to be hurt. "Cornelius, I am the headmaster of Hogwarts. If the ministry has any new incentives that affect my school, I demand to be involved."

His tone didn't sit too well with Amelia, and she wasn't slow to let him know. "This doesn't involve the headmaster, rather your deputy. It will involve extra, unpaid work for Minerva, so we are here today to ask if she wishes to be involved."

By this time they had been joined by Minerva, who wanted more details of what was involved before committing herself.

"If we can go somewhere private to discuss this, we want to keep it secret until the announcement." Albus immediately offered his office to the minister, though both witches then glowered at him.

"...and just how is that private, when those bloody portraits tell you everything?" Albus had the good grace to appear embarrassed at Minerva's outburst until Sirius solved the problem.

Arriving with Harry at his side, he offered the perfect solution. "I'll need to wait until after the meeting to work on their lessons, the room we hold them in would certainly fit the bill for whatever we're after."

Albus' nose was even more out of joint as he watched the group leave with Harry, things were bad when he didn't even know what was happening in his own school.

Henrika followed on with Neville, Padma and Hermione, knowing the room could easily accommodate whatever was needed for the two groups.

-oOoOo-

Harry was asked if he would like to sit-in on the initial briefing meeting, delighting him and confusing Minerva even more. Once Hogwarts Deputy Headmistress discovered just what was involved,

she wholeheartedly threw her support, time and anything else that was required of her behind this wonderful idea.

Harry had given this a lot of thought and had a few ideas of his own to bring to the meeting. "I would like one of the candidates to be muggle born, in honour of my mother. I also intend to get involved when they come to Hogwarts. The castle can be a scary place, I want all scholarship students to be charged with looking out for those coming behind them. I certainly intend to offer friendship to the two new first year students starting in September, I would expect them to carry that on the following year. A tradition has got to begin somewhere."

Minerva caught on at once. "You're looking for them to become mentors, keeping an eye on the younger ones through first year..."

"Not just first year, professor. This is being done in the Potter family name, I want this to be like members of a family. Brothers and sisters looking out for each other. We're very lucky in Ravenclaw to have Penny doing that job for us, she's simply brilliant and has been a great help to us settling in. In talking with our friends, not all houses are so lucky. One of my best friends is also a twin, and we have Fred and George Weasley here too. If there was a case for twins being offered scholarships, the Lily Potter foundation would fund the difference to ensure both got equal treatment - and this didn't deprive another student of a scholarship that year."

This was a golden opportunity for Cornelius to observe this boy first-hand, and so far he was very impressed. He had learned through Arthur that goblin children start school at five, and that Harry had extra tutors too. With early indications that the top two students in first year would be a muggle born and a goblin raised - both of whom attended school since they were five - it was again raising the question of why they waited until eleven before formally schooling magical children. This might be the place but certainly not the time to roast that old chestnut.

"Harry, we also want to honour the last surviving member of that family. On doing some research, we discovered the level of award was already set. For banishing a dark lord, we wish to award you the Order of Merlin, First Class."



Since Amelia was the one who had done the research, she knew what the minister was going to say. This allowed her to watch the reactions of the others to this news. Sirius appeared fit to burst with pride while Minerva was fighting back the tears that were forming in the corners of her eyes. Harry never even blinked.

"Minister, the dark lord isn't really gone - and I would feel such a fraud accepting on those headings."

Cornelius had actually prepared for this possibility, the politician in him wouldn't take no for an answer today. "I am aware of that, Harry, just as I am now aware that you train relentlessly in the hope of one day finishing the job you started all those years ago. To me, that in itself makes you deserving of this award."

Seeing that this had scored points, the minister pressed home his advantage. "I would also like to say, when that time comes, my ministry will stand alongside you in this battle. Madam Bones is quietly bringing her auror department onto a war footing. This won't happen overnight but, when you need us, we will be there with every wand ready to fight."

Knowing he was always going to have to accept an award of some description, Harry was delighted by the promise of support - and left with no other choice than to graciously accept.

Cornelius intended to announce the awards, and the ball in his honour, today. He would call a press conference this afternoon so the country could digest the news along with their Sunday breakfast. Harry asked, since she was now heavily involved in the Potter Scholarships, if Professor McGonagall could be added to their party for the ball.

The minister agreed at once, and then raised the only issue he could see being a sticking point. "We are unsure how to address the award. You won the award as Harry Potter but now go by the name of Harry Crow. Whichever appears on the award, people will rush to make judgements." Cornelius had watched as Dumbledore's planned award ceremony at Christmas went to hell in a hand basket, he had no intention of there being the slightest chance of that happening with the eyes of the world on them. All the T's would be crossed and the I's dotted, nothing was going to be left to chance.

Harry understood at once what the minister was implying, to have either Potter or Crow on the award would be construed as him already having made his choice. Something no one sitting around this table wanted. After a moment of thought, Harry made a suggestion. "My mum and dad named me Harry, a name my father has used my whole life, could I be just Harry?"

The minister looked to Amelia for her opinion. "I don't see why not. Might knock a lot of the stuffiness and formality out of the award ceremony - but who's to say that's such a bad thing."

With the last hurdle crossed, Cornelius headed off to organise his press conference. When the three trustees began to talk about their next meeting, where they would be discussing the candidates from this year's Hogwarts intake, Harry headed for his friends.

Padma got in first. "Okay, Harry, how much can you tell us?"

"Well, I think all our dance practice will be needed again - and you might need to protect some poor, defenceless wizard from being attacked by witches."

Neville caught Harry's drift at once. "I don't know what you're both talking about, but Padma, will you be my date to it?"

"So you want me to protect you from Parvati?"

Hermione was fighting the giggles, "...and Susan!"

Harry was enjoying the gentle teasing, and joined in. "...Hannah too!"

Neville was getting desperate now as he pleaded with her. "Please, Padma?"

"Oh, who could say no to those baby blue eyes, which is probably why the girls are chasing you in the first place. Let's have a deal, I'll be your date, and your bodyguard, until one of us gets a boyfriend or girlfriend?"

The look of relief on Neville's face set all of them off, with even Henrika laughing. The laughter soon stopped when Harry told them just what was going to be happening. Since the whole ball /

scholarship /award thing was going to be made public tomorrow, they only had to keep it quiet for tonight. No mention was made of Goblin Ambassadors, that entire part of the deal was still a secret.

As Harry explained what was said at the meeting, Hermione spotted a potential disaster in the making. "What will you wear? It will be the same problem if you appear in robes or your centurion uniform."

"Why doesn't he wear his Mr Darcy clothes?" Harry and Neville appeared confused while Hermione's blush lit the room. "Oh please, Hermione, you gave me the books. It practically leapt off the page at me. Some of those dresses sounded beautiful too, we could all go dressed similar - neither goblin nor wizard?"

Hermione may still have been blushing but she was the owner of a wide smile. "That's perfect, Padma, even my mum and dad could blend in then. Harry, she means clothes similar to the ones you were wearing when we first met."

This idea also won approval from Henrika, "Oh, I can so see Sirius as Mr Darcy, and yes, I've read the book too!"

Harry and Neville were left bemused at why the three were laughing. "Harry, I have enough trouble figuring out the differences between the four of us, did something else just get chipped in there?"

"I'm sure it's a girl thing, Neville, and no - I have no idea what they're on about either. We'll just turn up and have fun, that works for me."

Neville remembered what Harry had worn back in September, it was also splashed all over the Prophet with those graveyard pictures at Halloween, and would have no problem dressing similar. Harry and Lord Black attending the ball dressed like that could actually start a whole new fashion trend. That thought set Neville smiling, and also shaking his head that he was once more in the middle of all the madness. This year had been the best of his life, and summer was shaping up to be even better.

Henrika wanted them back on track though, this was still a lesson after all.

A/N thanks for reading

## Chapter 31

The prophet being delivered that Sunday morning generated an effect seldom experienced in the great hall of Hogwarts. It slowly sank into silence, with not even the sounds generated by cutlery or crockery escaping this vacuum of hush. It's often said that nature abhors a vacuum, and this one never stood a chance of existing for more than a few seconds. The noise started like a babbling brook, soft and gentle, but soon turned into a raging torrent of white water that engulfed every table - including the staff.

Sitting unmoved against this deluge, making them stand out like rocks jutting from the foaming water, the four friends were quietly finishing their breakfast. Bill would be here for their defence lesson in less than fifteen minutes.

"An Order of Merlin, First Class? Wow, Harry, just - wow!"

"I'm actually more excited about the scholarships, Roger, which was the only reason I agreed to this. My dad and mum laid their lives down for me that night, but all anyone ever talks about is the fact I didn't die. You didn't die yesterday, let's celebrate that."

"I understand what you're trying to say, Harry, but I wasn't hit with the killing curse yesterday..."

"Ah, but here's the thing, Roger - how do you know I was? The only person to come out of that house alive was me, and no healer even checked me over until I ended up in Gringotts. Voldemort's wand was never found either, so who knows what happened that night?"

This had the entire Ravenclaw table held enthralled, no one had looked at the 'incident' from that point of view before. "A story appears in the Prophet and everyone just accepts that's what actually happened. We all saw at Halloween how wrong that newspaper can be. I was fifteen months old and whisked away from that house by Rubeus Hagrid, under Dumbledore's orders. Where was the investigation? Where was the process of law? Whatever Dumbledore says is just taken as truth - if not law. Yes he's a powerful wizard but he can get things wrong, just like everybody else."

His girlfriend latched on to what Harry was actually saying here. "It's Professor Binns all over again. No one questions what they're being told, so that becomes the accepted truth. People have been able to write what they like about that night, and no one can say whether they are right or wrong." Hermione knew Harry had memories of that night but had no intention of mentioning that fact to anyone else.

The arrival of Parvati saved Harry from having to answer any more questions on what happened that Halloween, she appeared rather upset at the news in the Prophet.

"Weren't we supposed to be on holiday when it's your birthday? Does this mean the holiday plans have changed?"

"Yes, we're juggling the schedule a bit to put us back in Britain for a couple of days. I thought you would be pleased, going to your first ball?"

The implications of what Harry just said were mind-blowing but Parvati needed to hear the actual words coming from his mouth - there could be no mistakes made here. "Are you saying what I think you're saying, Harry?"

"I am the guest of honour and get my own table, all of the people going on holiday with us over the summer will be at that table."

She looked questioningly toward her twin, "You knew?"

"We just found out yesterday, I owled home last night. Mum's going to be so excited."

"I owled my gran last night too, she probably wouldn't believe that story in the Prophet if I didn't."

Hermione was nodding her agreement with both their friends. "Eargit took a letter home for me, it should be some evening."

Harry provided the final piece of information. "Madam Bones was one of the ball organisers, so Susan should be getting an owl today too, telling her and Hannah of the new arrangements."

Susan and Hannah came racing over, clutching a piece of parchment in her hand. "Oh I can't believe we're all going to the ball together, this will be brilliant!"

Parvati's mind had wandered in a different direction though. "The shopping voucher now makes sense, I'll be able to get a new dress..."

This saw Harry standing and shaking his head toward the Gryffindor witch. "Sorry, Parvati, that voucher was for your birthday - this is a different item. We'll have to arrange another shopping trip for this."

Parvati thought she was in heaven, a holiday, a ball and now two shopping trips! "Hermione, you're just gonna have to excuse me..." With a squeal of delight, she leapt at Harry and practically hugged the life out of him. Finishing with a kiss on the cheek just as Bill arrived.

"Harry, my teaching you defence doesn't seem to be doing much good."

"My humble apologies, Curse-breaker Weasley, I find there is no defence against a Patil twin who wants a hug."

Bill enjoyed the casual atmosphere they could adopt at the weekend, though knew he couldn't get Harry to just call him Bill. The Curse-breaker title was a mark of respect that, in Harry's eyes, he had earned - no goblin would disrespect that. He could still tease Harry back though.

"...and how are your defences when it comes to hugs from girls called Granger?"

"Sorry again sir, I expect a T for that class. I just can't seem to get the hang of why I would want to defend against that."

This set Bill off laughing, "Good answer, Harry, I only hope you're as good at dodging spells. As a special treat, we got hold of some training dummies that fire back. Should make today a lot more interesting."

"As long as they don't have swords or axes in their hands, that's fine with me." The weekends were Padma's favourite lessons, having

fun while learning suited her personality so much better. "Girls, Hermione had a great idea about dresses. Why don't we have lunch at the Hufflepuff table and talk about it, that way Harry and Neville won't be forced to listen."

Her twin's thoughts again went in a different direction. "Do we need dates for this ball?"

It was left to Harry to break the only bit of bad news. "Sorry girls, there isn't any room at the table for more people..."

"So we need to share you and Neville?"

That was never going to work, and Padma quickly marked everyone's dance cards. "Sorry sis, Neville has already asked me to be his date. I'm also pretty sure Hermione is not the kind of witch who shares. Well, at least not Harry."

This comment drew laughter from Susan and Hannah, with no denials coming from Hermione or Harry. Bill marching the four away may have stopped the conversation but this would be the main topic inside Hogwarts until the exams hit. Parvati raced back to the Gryffindor table, desperate to tell her news to Lavender.

Dumbledore was certainly not pleased at the Prophet's news, Fudge appeared to be succeeding where he had failed so spectacularly. How the hell did that happen? He turned his ire in the direction of his deputy. "Minerva, as headmaster, I demand to be kept apprised of all the details of this scholarship."

His deputy was having none of it. "Sorry, headmaster, you are neither on the scholarship board of trustees nor require the information on any educational grounds I can perceive. Just what are your reasons for demanding this information?"

"Damn it, Minerva, I'm the headmaster!"

"I am aware of that, though still don't see the reason behind this demand. You haven't concerned yourself with the new first year intake for almost forty years, why the sudden interest now?"

"This scholarship could be a powerful force for good, but we need to ensure that the right people are chosen..."

"We will ensure that the 'right' children are chosen. Amelia, Sirius and I might have a different definition of 'right' than you do, but I'm learning this is not necessarily a bad thing. If you would like to make a formal complaint, I really don't know who you would direct it at. The trust is set in such a way that, to replace a trustee, you need the agreement of the other two. If you can convince Sirius and Amelia to replace me with yourself, you'll deserve your place on the trust board. Lord Black will be in the castle today as usual, I can only suggest you mention it to him."

Albus was taken aback at this information. "There is no other involvement, no goblin input?"

"No, why should there be? Amelia represents the ministry, I'm there as Hogwarts' voice while Sirius speaks for the Potters - until Harry is old enough to replace his godfather. The only request made was from Harry himself, he wants one of the students chosen each year to be a muggle born like his mother - we all agreed to that."

Dumbledore didn't agree, but then his opinion was neither asked for nor apparently counted for much when he gave it. He decided to keep his own council and wait for a better opportunity to try and let his specific thoughts on the matter be known. At the moment, there was such a groundswell of support for this measure that to speak against it would see him swept aside.

Severus appeared at his side and slapped his copy of the prophet onto the table.

Leaning in so only the headmaster could hear, Severus made his feelings known. "Still think I'm overreacting? I would be publicly flogged, before my soul was a dementor's lunch - and that would be just the ministry's response."

Severus strode out of the hall, taking Dumbledore's appetite with him.

-oOoOo-

Sirius entered the great hall and stopped dead in his tracks. His eyes had immediately traveled to where his godson usually sat, and soon locked on to Harry. What had stopped Sirius was the fact that



Hermione wasn't there, it took him a moment to spot her sitting at the Hufflepuff table. That she was smiling and chatting animatedly with their friends eased Sirius' fears, he didn't know how these two would handle their first fight - he was certain though that neither of them would be smiling.

He approached Harry and Neville, deciding to play dumb. "Hey you two, where are the girls?"

"Hi Sirius, they're over at the Hufflepuff table, chatting with the other three about dresses for the ball. They thankfully spared Neville and me that torture."

This blew the last remaining fears that they'd had a falling-out clear away, Sirius also had something to add to that conversation. "Your father has offered the goblin tailors to make all our outfits for the ball, since they made the original that inspired this idea."

Neville was immediately shaking his head. "I had to tell Parvati about the birthday party, you're on your own for this one mate."

"...and here was me thinking a Longbottom had my back."

"Hey, if it wasn't for Padma, I would be dreading this ball. Witches can be really scary. Just go over there, you know Hermione won't let anything bad happen to her boyfriend."

"Thanks a bunch, Neville."

Sirius was trying not to laugh as he watched Harry stroll over to the five girls.

His girlfriend was the first to spot his approach. "Does Sirius want us to start early? I thought we had another ten minutes?"

"No, Hermione, he brought some news from my father. He's offering the goblin tailors to make all your dresses..."

For the second time today, Harry had a witch screaming with joy before engulfing him in a bone crushing hug. There were no complaints this time though as Hermione was the one doing the screaming / hugging. They had kept any public displays of affection to hand holding, so the kiss that followed the hug would again set

tongues wagging. Not that it was much more than a peck on the lips, it was just the first time they had seen this couple kiss in public.

Hermione though was too excited to care. "That's fantastic, Harry, and solves all our problems." She then turned to their friends, trying to explain her excitement. "The goblin tailors made my dress for Harry's centurion ceremony, they are simply brilliant. I got to choose everything and they were so nice, my dress also fitted like a second skin. They made Madame Malkin seem like an amateur."

Her excitement instantly spread to their friends, though the option to hug Harry in thanks wasn't available to anyone else. Hermione still had him wrapped in her arms, proving Padma correct. Hermione wasn't about to share Harry with anyone.

-oOoOo-

Witches and wizards the length and breadth of Britain rejoiced at this announcement, and then quickly began to plan how they could acquire tickets for the event of the year.

The country's purebloods tended to fall into one of three categories, and their opinion on this momentous event depended on which faction they supported. The light faction thought this recognition was long overdue, and couldn't wait to see their saviour accept the country's highest award.

Those witches and wizards of a neutral persuasion depended heavily on their abilities to read the political situation, so they could lean in that direction while maintaining their centre stance. Since the ministry appeared to have jumped heavily into the light, that would be the direction they would lean - for now. None could see any reason not to support this event, so they would.

Those with a darker disposition had been caught on the hop by the sudden shift in the ministry's position. Malfoy's exposure had left the minister with no other option but to distance himself, and his ministry, from Lucius Malfoy and his supporters. They had briefly rejoiced at Dumbledore's very public embarrassment, before realising that had pushed Fudge the one place they feared - right into the capable arms of Amelia Bones.

The head of the DMLE was tough, resourceful and very bright. That she had lost all but one of her entire family to death eater attacks meant there would be no forgiveness to be found there. With Malfoy and Dumbledore expressing contradictory opinions on every subject, Cornelius Fudge had usually given the impression that he didn't know what day of the week it was - not any more. The ministry now had a clear direction, and it wasn't in their favour.

At this moment in time, to publicly fight against this change in the tide would be politically and socially suicidal. They would have to bide their time and slowly try to reverse the current back in their direction. Most would openly support this event, and even attempt to acquire tickets - just not try too hard.

-oOoOo-

Minerva was trying hard to understand the resistance against her choice for a Potter scholarship. She had spent the best part of a fortnight going over every new student's file, and this child jumped out at her at every turn as a deserving candidate. She was left unsure what criterion the other two were working with but was determined to get to the bottom of this.

"Ginevra will be the seventh child Molly and Arthur will have sent to Hogwarts, and September will see five Weasley children attending the castle at the same time. They are also as light a family as it's possible to find, and their eldest son has been tutoring Harry and his friends for most of the term. In all of our new first year, I can't see a more deserving case for a Potter scholarship than this. That she is also a pureblood will balance nicely with the muggle born we've already chosen. If you have another reason for rejecting this candidate, then I think I'm entitled to hear it."

It was left to Amelia to try and calm her old friend's fears. "We agree with everything you've just said, Minerva, but there is specific information we can't divulge just yet. Can I say that good things are planned for Arthur at the ministry, things that will certainly ease any financial worries the Weasley family might have. These planned changes could leave our choice of Ginevra then open to question, something I don't think we can afford - especially in the scholarship's inaugural year. This information is very sensitive but will certainly be made public before the summer ball, it will all drop into place then and you will see we are right."

She was wracking her brains for a hint of what these planned changes could be, especially since Sirius appeared to be aware of them, and Minerva could only come up with one thing - it had to involve Harry. Deciding it was pointless to pursue this any longer, and knowing Amelia wouldn't lie to her, Minerva conceded her argument.

"Very well then, remove the financial hardship and there remains no grounds to support that candidate. The witch you both chose would have been my second choice so I will happily support her as the other Potter scholarship student. I shall also be studying the Prophet closely for Arthur Weasley's good news."

This drew a relieved chuckle from Amelia. "Believe me, Minerva, you won't have to look for the news. It will be blazed right across the front page."

Sirius wanted to know who got to tell Harry, with Minerva asking for that honour. "Harry said he wanted this to be like an extended family, I wanted to have a chat with him and see just how far he wants to take that. I will be arranging a visit to Diagon Alley, he may want to meet with them before September first."

"That's a brilliant idea, Minerva, but we will be out of the country for most of the summer. Arranging it near the end of the holidays would work, they could all do their school shopping together."

-oOoOo-

He could see she was troubled, the signs were hard to miss. Nervously chewing on the end of her quill while neither turning the page of her book nor writing any notes, Hermione had been deep in thought for the last ten minutes. Since the four friends were currently in the library, revising for exams, Harry had to keep his voice to barely above a whisper.

"Hermione, if you don't tell us what's bothering you, we won't be able to help."

Getting caught woolgathering actually made her blush, it was also scary sometimes how well Harry could read her mood. "Sorry guys, was revising some stuff from earlier in the term and my mind just

wandered. To be honest, I was struggling to believe some of the things that's happened to us. I mean, we're only first years!"

Seeing where this was leading, Harry tried to point her in the right direction. "Why are we sitting here revising for our exams?"

The answer to that was obvious, and Hermione didn't disappoint. "So we can get good marks in our exams, it's important that we study and do well."

Harry had another easy question for her. "So, you would expect the four of us to perform better than say - Ron Weasley?"

This very suggestion appeared to light a fire under Hermione. "Considering he does the bare minimum to get by, and none of us have ever seen him studying, that would have to be yes. He seems the type who will grab his books the night before the exam, and there's always the chance that the right questions might come up for him. I would still expect the four of us to get higher marks though. What are you getting at, Harry?"

"What you're saying is that we'll be prepared, while Ron Weasley has to hope for a large slice of luck to do well?"

Since that summed up Hermione's thoughts, she nodded in confirmation. Padma and Neville were also listening intently, curious to see where this was going.

"Well I think what you have to consider is that I've been prepared, and also been aided by massive slices of luck." There was no chance Harry was going to get away without explaining that comment. "I walked into Hogwarts as a goblin warrior, a warrior who had been training and being briefed for this mission for years. Discounting Master Flitwick, and now Henrica, Hermione knows more about the goblin nation than the rest of the staff put together..."

"...but Harry, I've barely scratched the surface."

"I know, but none of them have even bothered to learn that much. Let's take the sorting as an example. You three now know me, what would you expect me to do in that situation?"

It was Padma who was first in with an answer, beginning to glimpse what Harry was trying to say. "You would never renounce being a goblin, and certainly not because of a situation Dumbledore forced you into."

Neville and Hermione agreed totally with that assessment, gaining a smile from Harry. "We had the chances of Dumbledore pulling something like that around the twenty percent mark, there was even a concern he wouldn't let me leave and confine me to the castle..."

Hermione's hand shot into his at that declaration, offering comfort as Neville asked the question. "What would you have done then?"

"I have a way of sending my father a short coded message that we save for emergencies. Gringotts would have shut its doors until I was released, meanwhile Hermione and I would have been doing our best to escape. Once outside the wards, we would portkey to Gringotts."

She didn't know what it was about being included in his escape plans but Hermione was sitting with a wide grin on her face.

"So you see I was well prepared, but then also handed a massive slice of luck by Hogwarts declaring I was her champion. The duel with Master Sharpshard also comes to mind, we all know he could take me in under two minutes. Instead, my centurion armour makes me faster and stronger while being able to cast with both blades is a massive advantage. Even so, it was Hogwarts who finally tipped the balance. She hindered and obstructed Master Sharpshard at every opportunity, while keeping my path clear."

Padma and Neville were both sure what had swung that fight in Harry's favour, kicking Hermione had enraged their friend beyond anything either had ever seen.

Hermione herself was beginning to see the point Harry was making. "So you're saying that preparation, along with luck, has got you ahead all year?"

That was pretty close to what Harry was trying to say. "The headmaster didn't bother to do his homework, and has found himself on the back foot since the first of September. We studied every move he's ever made and had a full profile of Dumbledore that was

constantly being updated. I don't know if it's his arrogance that he couldn't possibly be wrong or if he didn't want anyone to know I was at Gringotts. Master Flitwick sits at the same table and would have been a mine of information on goblins, the headmaster had that resource at his fingertips and never used it. He keeps treating me like a wizard, with even Snape seeming to learn that doesn't work. Does that answer your questions?"

It was now a blushing Hermione who nodded, before going back to her revising. She could hear Padma sniggering in amusement and was trying to ignore it. The discovery that Snape was responsible for passing the prophecy on to Voldemort had kicked Harry's animosity against Dumbledore to a whole different level. Hermione just hoped they could reach the holidays without a confrontation, she should have known better.

-oOoOo-

Minerva really couldn't exclude Albus from this demonstration, not with the examiners arriving in the castle earlier than usual. With Harry once more all over the Prophet, Griselda had manoeuvred to get the rest of the examiners into Hogwarts when the interest was at its peak. All she'd needed to mention was that Minerva wanted their opinion on the boy-who-lived's class and her fellow examiners couldn't wait to set off for the castle.

Harry was having to perform boyfriend duties and try to talk Hermione down from the funk she was getting herself into. The older Ravenclaws had recognised most of the examiners and wondered why they were in the castle early, sparking Hermione's funk.

"Our exams don't start until Monday, Hermione, you don't get those examiners until our OWL year. Professor McGonagall told us they might be coming to see our class, it will just be the same as last time."

A chance to help put her friend's mind onto something else while teasing was not something to be dismissed lightly. Padma just couldn't resist. "Oh, Hermione, I wonder if any of the other girls will take Harry up on his offer to pet his dragon?"

Catching the double meaning her friend was hinting at, Hermione knew exactly how to stop this stone dead. "As long as they

remember I know the goblin command for bite their hands off, I don't see there being any problems - do you?"

She wasn't sure whether it was the look in Hermione's eyes or the tone of her voice but something sent a shiver up Padma's back. "Merlin, Hermione, you can be one scary witch when you want to be. Are you sure you're not part goblin?"

Saying that to any other witch would be considered a severe insult but Padma knew Hermione would take it the spirit it was offered, as a compliment. "Why thank you, Padma, that's the second time someone has said that recently. Harry must be rubbing off on me..."

It was only after spotting Harry's wide-eyed expression that Hermione realised what she had said, that and the sniggering traveling up and down the Ravenclaw table.

Padma put her arm comfortingly around Hermione's shoulders. "Ignore the plebs, Hermione, we knew what you meant. I think saying that Harry's had an influence on all of us is certainly a better way of putting it though."

She could feel her friend's shoulders shaking, it was only when Hermione couldn't hold her laughter in any longer that Padma realised she wasn't upset. Hermione laughing at her slip of the tongue just confirmed what Padma had said, Harry was certainly influencing all of them.

-oOoOo-

The transfiguration lesson went pretty much the same as last time, with Padma having her bluff called and stroking the dragon with a trembling hand. The examiners looked pleased, all except one - there is always one.

The students had noticed him at once, he could hardly be missed. This wizard was well over six feet tall yet would have trouble tipping the scales over ten stone when he was soaking wet. This despite having a snout that could have been a model for the dipping nose cone the engineers designed for Concord. Wearing a frown since before he stepped in the door, this was one long streak of misery.



Gordon McPhee had been saddled with the nickname 'Grumpy Gordon' when he attended Hogwarts, 'Moaning McPhee' was also suggested but Myrtle had kinda got the moaning name-tag all sewn up - the ghost really had no peer in the moaning stakes when she was on her game. Grumpy Gordon was a nickname that stuck even to the present day, probably because it was so apt.

"I fail to see why we should change centuries of history because one class wants to do things differently. Our current method of transfiguration was painstakingly developed by our forefathers, one class a week for nine months and suddenly we want to throw all that away?"

Albus was appalled at what he had witnessed in this classroom. This new form of transfiguration had the potential to trigger massive changes in magical Britain over a very short period of time, something that in his opinion was to be avoided at all costs. "I'm afraid I must agree with some of the fine points Mr McPhee has raised. I saw no notes being taken nor homework issued, far less a textbook being used for reference. What textbooks would you put on the list for next year? Are there even textbooks available?"

Gordon seized on this to further his argument. "Exactly my point, headmaster. We have books written by recognised masters on the subject that we would be consigning to the rubbish heap. No textbooks, no notes and no homework, why do we need a transfiguration master teaching a class when the skills she spent many years learning clearly aren't required?"

Minerva was ready to go to war but Griselda interrupted before the enraged transfiguration professor could say anything, far less draw her wand. "Perhaps we could ask Mr Crow if there are any books on this method of transfiguration?"

The entire class were hanging on every word spoken. To most of the students, this was their favourite class. Even Ron Weasley would cast his vote for this new method of transfiguration. With no notes to take, books to read or homework to be done, this was easily his favourite class. That he had completed the entire first year curriculum by the end of January was immaterial to Ron. No one wanted a return to the more traditional method of teaching transfiguration.

"It's Centurion Crow, Ma'am, and sorry, but the only written material on transfiguration is purely introductory."

The class were then left wondering if Snape had based his nasty demeanour on his favourite examiner, there were certainly startling similarities in the sarcastic delivery. "Did you really expect them to have books? Please!"

With Dumbledore already in the classroom, the last thing Harry needed was a reminder of Snape. Everyone in the class who really knew Harry winced at his answer to this examiner, an examiner who reminded the muggle borns of the Great Gonzo from the Muppet Show.

"Excuse me sir, the goblins had a written language and were experimenting with printing while people on this island were huddled over pieces of shredded bark, trying to get a spark by striking two lumps of flint together. The goblins have had the written word as long as man has had fire." This silenced the entire class but Harry was just getting warmed up. "I realise that there are people in this room desperate to call me a liar, and that's okay. Just because you think I'm full of dragon shite still doesn't make your views on any of these matters right."

Dumbledore then tried to play mediator, which was certainly the wrong person doing entirely the wrong thing where Harry was concerned. "Harry, my boy, can I offer a piece of friendly advice? These people standing here hold your future in their hands, it might not be wise to antagonise them..."

Harry cut right across the headmaster. "...which is why we had a history exam that was the laughing stock of Europe. I'll save these witches and wizards the trouble of remembering me for future reference, I won't be sitting any O.W.L.'s."

There was now lack of noise and movement as that comment froze everyone, well, not quite. Hermione's hand again shot into Harry's under the desk. He held his girlfriend's hand before offering a comforting squeeze to let her know he was still in control.

Albus was so shocked it was left to Griselda to break the silence. "Centurion Crow, if you have no intention of sitting O.W.L.'s, and presumably N.E.W.T.s, could you tell us why you are here?"

"That's easy, Ma'am, I'm at Hogwarts for an education..."

Grumpy Gordon thought he had his opportunity. "Without exam passes, you're nothing boy. The ministry can legally snap your wand..."

The thunk made the entire class jump, all except Hermione who'd seen Harry draw his knife and slam it point first into the desk. "I don't have a wand to break! Even Dumbledore's pet half-giant couldn't snap that, not without slicing his fingers clean off. Might stop him illegally lifting any more toddlers out their cribs."

McGonagall's 'HARRY!', combined with Hermione squeezing his hand hard enough to stop blood flow drew Harry back. He had no intention of backing down though, just curtailing his temper.

"Mr McPhee hinted that this class doesn't need Professor McGonagall, I'll say it out loud that Hogwarts doesn't need Mr McPhee. Professor McGonagall has been teaching her N.E.W.T. class for seven years and knows her students' capabilities in transfiguration better than anyone on this planet. Why should a stranger then come into the school, meet that student for about fifteen minutes and then they get to award a grade that effects that student for the rest of their life?"

Minerva could see Harry getting agitated at the slight to the goblins but couldn't understand why he was already refusing to sit exams. "We need to be seen to be impartial, Harry, that is why we have examiners from the ministry."

"I trust your opinion, Professor, rather than that of an outsider. When Master Pitslay thinks I've reached apprenticeship level, he will tell me. I will then have to decide if he would take me on to become a master, or whether my future lies elsewhere. No goblin needs a slip of paper to say how far they took their education, our system has no such exams. Since I'm attending Hogwarts as a goblin, I have no need of them."

Harry was rubbing his thumb along the back of Hermione's held hand, drawing as much comfort from this action as his girlfriend was. He needed it as Dumbledore once more entered the verbal fray, the old wizard just didn't know when to shut his mouth.

"Harry, my boy. You are taking a decision here that will affect the rest of your life, a decision that doesn't need to be made for another four years. I would ask you to reconsider that decision..."

"Why, is your new plan to send Tom Riddle my O.W.L. results and hope he dies of shame that a goblin beat his scores? I have to say it's defiantly an improvement on your 'power of love' suggestion. I still only kiss Hermione."

Hermione wasn't in the least embarrassed, she was watching how close Harry's hand stayed to his knife that was still sticking out the desk. She moved their joined hands until they were next to her sword hilt. Harry gave a slight smile at this but Dumbledore wouldn't let it go.

"If you don't sit your exams, you could potentially find yourself wanting to stay in the wizarding world and being unable to do so..."

Harry's loud laughter cut Dumbledore off, leaving half the class thinking he'd finally lost it.

It took Harry a moment to regain control before he could answer. "Sorry, Hermione but that was funnier than any of those comedy tapes you showed Padma and me over the holidays." He then turned his attention back to Dumbledore. "IF I decide to stay in the wizarding community, I shall be Lord Harry James Potter, Order of Merlin, First Class. Do you honestly think people will care whether I sat my O.W.L.'s or not?"

"Your mother and father would want you to..." Dumbledore never got to say any more, Harry was on his feet with his knife yanked out the desk and now pointed between the headmaster's eyes.

"My father will agree with my decision, believing it is mine to make. As to my mum and dad, I'll never know since they're both gone. It's looking more and more likely you had a hand in it too. Remember my promise old man, if we get proof then I'll be coming for you!"

Hermione noticed Harry's armour had began to creep down his wrists though his knife never wavered, she was certainly not the only one who was relieved to hear the bell ringing.

Minerva actually stood in front of Albus before speaking. "Class dismissed. Centurion, a moment of your time outside, please?"

Harry nodded before heading outside with the rest of the class. The instant her last student left the classroom, Minerva spun on Dumbledore. "You just couldn't let it go, could you? Always thinking you know best and trying to push that view down other people's throats, is it any wonder you're barred from going anywhere near Harry. You lose me my two best students and I might just follow them out the door. I'll tell you this, Albus Dumbledore, if you had anything to do with Lily and James' murder - I'll kill you myself!"

The examiners all stood there, shocked and stunned. Every member of the British magical community had laid eyes on the picture of a golden boy-who-lived standing over a bleeding Dumbledore, all the examiners had thought they were about to witness the live version. Albus had been playing down any talk of tension in his school, his deputy just backed Crow and threatened to kill the headmaster if the boy's claims could be proven.

Griselda was thinking if that crime could be proven, the wizarding public would do the job before Minerva could get her wand on Dumbledore. This ball would confirm James and Lily Potter as two heroes of their country, if Albus was involved in their murder there would be hell to pay.

Gordon couldn't believe what he just witnessed. His speciality was defence so he had been focused on the boy's eyes, what he saw there sent a shiver of fear up his spine. This boy was squaring up to Albus Dumbledore yet there had been no fear in his eyes, and it certainly wasn't a case of bravado either. There was a determination expressed there that Gordon expected to see in a few of the better N.E.W.T. candidates, very occasionally an exceptional O.W.L. student - certainly not in someone finishing their first year at Hogwarts. He also couldn't help notice the other three students who were obviously ready to spring to his aid, just what was going on here?

Albus was wondering the exact same thing, and also wondering how that could have gone any worse. When Cornelius discovered Harry wasn't going to be sitting any O.W.L.'s he would hit the roof. When it became known that Albus Dumbledore was responsible for this

revelation, and he was sure Minerva was going to put the blame on him, Albus wondered if he might not be barred from the ministry too.

-oOoOo-

The three friends had waited along the corridor for Harry, with Hermione racing to him the instant McGonagall returned to her class.

"Hey, I'm fine. Sorry about that but can we cancel revision tonight?"

They had all caught up with each other now, leaving Padma free to answer. "Sure, Harry. You got detention with McGonagall?"

"What, no. I just want the time to tell you all what's going on. Can't have my friends thinking I'm turning into a right nutter, the rest of the school can think what it likes."

Hermione was back on Harry's arm as the four friends headed off to lunch. She actually stopped a moment at Harry's answer. "What did McGonagall want with you then?"

"Oh, she wanted to put a word in for Hagrid. She claims he's a rather simple soul who would jump in the lake and wrestle the giant squid if Dumbledore asked him to. Sirius actually agrees with that assessment but he can't forgive Hagrid either. Hagrid may have been blindly following Dumbledore's orders but he knew Sirius was my godfather, so he must have known that's where I was supposed to go."

This had Hermione shaking her head in disbelief. "In the armed forces, if you're given an order that's unlawful, the 'I was following orders' defence doesn't apply. I don't know how that works when a headmaster is giving the orders to a groundskeeper?"

"Oh, McGonagall also wanted a word about the Potter Scholarships, they've made their choices and needed to know if I was going to meet the two students beforehand. She suggested meeting in Diagon Alley, and then we could all do our shopping together. Sirius and Amelia both knew our summer schedule so McGonagall had already picked a date she knew we'd be available."

"That's a brilliant idea, Harry. I wish I'd known someone on the train last year, sitting with friends on the express at Christmas was so

much better than being alone and terrified on the first of September."

This drew a big smile from Hermione as she too cast her mind back. "I agree that's a brilliant idea, Neville, but I met Harry on the train so I can't really complain. Did McGonagall tell you anything about them, Harry?"

He nodded before answering. "One is a muggle born wizard who's going to be the first in his family, but not the last. He has a younger brother and sister, and both of them are magical. His name is Colin Creevey and his dad is a milkman. Hermione, what's a milkman?"

She thought of the best way of explaining this that her friends would understand. "You know how at my house we can phone and the take-away get's delivered? Well Colin's dad delivers milk."

Padma was still struggling to get her head around this 'phone and it will be delivered to your door' concept, even after seeing it in action multiple times. "So you phone and his dad rushes to your door with some milk?"

The old Hermione would have went into great detail about dairies, milk floats and regular rounds - and they would all have missed lunch by the time she was finished. "Something like that, Padma. Who got the other scholarship, Harry?"

"A young girl who is an only child and lost her mother a year or so back. Her name's Luna Lovegood and I got the impression McGonagall was really hoping we would take her under our wings."

Padma grabbed Neville by the arm as they increased their pace toward the great hall. "Well, whether they know it or not, those two just found themselves with four new friends. Now let's get to lunch. Watching Harry scare the adults always gives me an appetite, and we've got our normal defence class next."

The four friends made their way to lunch, the quartet weren't the only ones that noticed neither Dumbledore nor McGonagall made it down.

A/N Thanks for reading and Happy Hogmanay

## Chapter 32

After dinner, the four friends headed up to the seventh floor. Harry didn't want there to be any way this conversation could be overheard. He also appreciated Hermione waiting until now to discover why he'd suddenly announced to all of first year he had no intention of sitting his O.W.L.'s, even though she was obviously desperate to know.

Hogwarts provided the quartet with a cozy room that held a couple of sofas facing each other, Harry and Hermione slipped into one, leaving Neville and Padma to occupy the second.

Taking a deep breath, Harry began to tell his friends why he'd asked them here. "Padma, Neville, there are things going on behind the scenes you need to know about. I'm sorry that I can't tell you everything but I think you deserve to know what might affect the four of us. Neville, this is going to be hard to hear mate. It's only certain things we've just discovered that have me telling you this now."

Padma shifted closer to her friend. The way Harry was talking, Neville would soon need any comfort she could offer.

"We have to go back before we were born to discover where all our troubles started, they began with a prophecy that links me to Voldemort. You see, until Voldemort visited Godric's Hollow that Halloween, the prophecy could have applied to one of two boys - Harry Potter or Neville Longbottom."

This was a revelation not even Hermione had heard before, it shocked the three listeners as Harry continued. "It wasn't until Voldemort cast his spell at me that I became the child of the prophecy. Had he chosen to visit the Longbottoms first, Neville could have been saddled with being the boy-who-lived - and I would be the one visiting my mum and dad in St Mungo's. Those death eaters knew about the prophecy, with the Potters dead they went after the Longbottoms - looking for some answers."

Both wizards now found themselves being comforted by the witch sitting next to them, telling the story was affecting Harry nearly as much as Neville hearing it.



"We knew the prophecy was made to Dumbledore and assumed Sirius had told Voldemort about it, while betraying my mum and dad. When we found out Sirius was innocent, my father began an investigation into the people who were responsible for an innocent man being sent to Azkaban. That's when we discovered what Crouch was up to, and got Sirius free. The investigation didn't stop there though, and has just provided us with the name of the death eater who told the prophecy to Voldemort. It was Snape!"

It was only Padma's arm around Neville that stopped him springing to his feet. He looked to Harry, hoping this horror story wasn't real. "Harry, why is Snape still walking around Hogwarts?"

"Believe me, Neville, I so want to hack the bastard to pieces. The problem is Dumbledore, he knows what Snape did and has been protecting him all these years..."

This proved a revelation too far for Padma, she spat out a string of words that they assumed to be Hindi before reverting to English. "How could that doddering old arse be stupid enough to keep Snape in the school with you two at Hogwarts? If it wasn't for Master Pitslay, both of you would even be in his class - that's just sick!"

Neville was having a revelation of his own, Harry's outburst in class now made perfect sense. "You think Dumbledore gave that information to Snape so he would pass it on to Voldemort? It's the only thing that makes any sense because I know how much I want to attack that greasy bastard. For you not to, there would need to be a very good reason."

Harry was delighted to see how far his friend had progressed from the boy who was almost frightened of his own shadow. "My father manoeuvred Dumbledore into a position where he would reveal how Voldemort got to hear about the prophecy. The only problem is, Dumbledore has no idea he was set up and hasn't twigged we know about Snape. If we go after Snape, Dumbledore is bound to realise some of what's going on. There are things happening that should destroy any public credibility Dumbledore has left, and may even see him heading to Azkaban - if we can provide enough information for the ministry to go after him. There is a chance Snape may slip out the country before we can drop the shit onto Dumbledore, I think it's a chance we need to take. Given Dumbledore's track record, the

odds of Snape being someone he manipulated to get what he wanted are better than even money."

There was still something troubling Neville though. "I just can't work out why he would do that, what's in it for Dumbledore?"

"Henrica spelt it out for us in history class, Neville. Voldemort and his death eaters were killing any and all opposition, the estimate at that time was the ministry would fall by Christmas. Sirius told me our parents were very close, and also part of a group that opposed the death eaters. This group was led by Albus Dumbledore."

The implications behind this hit Hermione hard. "He would be able to manipulate situations to meet the terms of the prophecy, you told me your parents had defied Voldemort three times..."

Padma was on the exact same wavelength as her friend. "...and if he had Snape on the other side, he could pretty much do what he liked."

"Henrica tries to get us to look behind the facts of history. Can't you just see Dumbledore thinking the Potters and Longbottoms being wiped out was a fair price to pay for stopping Voldemort, especially since it was costing him nothing." The mental picture that Harry was painting was one that his friends had no trouble recognising.

Hermione had just put two and two together, and hoped harder than she'd ever hoped for anything in her young life that the answer she was seeing was actually three hundred and twenty seven - anything but four. "Is this all a mission for Gringotts, Harry, is that why you're not going to sit O.L.W.'s?"

Seeing the panic in her eyes, Harry took his girlfriend's hand in both of his. "I came to Hogwarts as a goblin warrior. My mission was to promote goblin / wizard relations, with getting rid of Binns at the top of my list. Harry Crow's personal mission was to make friends, and get some idea of where his place was in the world. When I spotted a young witch struggling to get her trunk onto the express, I thought here was someone else looking for a friend. I had watched you approach that group of Slytherin girls, I didn't hear what they said but I'm certain it wouldn't be welcome to Hogwarts."

Hermione leant into Harry, the panic in her eyes now replaced with an apology.

"After the troll in the infirmary, when I thought you and Padma wanted nothing more to do with me, I had decided not to return after Halloween. I was sure my father would have a replacement history teacher by then, just as I was sure there was nothing left for me at Hogwarts. I understand keeping secrets is bad, which is why I told the three of you as much as I could that lunchtime with my father. You three now know more about what's going on than officials at the ministry."

Pulling her boyfriend toward her, Hermione then instigated their longest kiss to date. This kiss wasn't about passion, rather both confirming they hadn't lost something that was so important to the young couple - the fact that they were still a couple. "I can say I'm sorry, Harry, but I thought it would be better if I showed you. I have been racking my brains all day to figure out why you would do the work and then not sit exams. With all this talk of manipulation, I added up the facts and came up with a totally stupid answer. The answer was so shocking though, it actually stopped me thinking straight. Since the day we met, you have been as honest as you could with me."

Harry now had a smile on his face, thinking that one day kissing Hermione might actually overtake hugging Hermione as his favourite thing in all the world. "I'm sorry too, the reasons I gave in class were the truth but it was really something I should have talked over with you first though, rather than just springing it on you along with everyone else. Dumbledore just makes me so mad that I announced my decision on the spur of the moment, I'll need to stay out of his way until the holidays. I could actually feel my armour slowly starting to slide over my body, getting ready for action - I didn't even know it could do that by itself!"

Padma had been ready to slap some sense into her friend, she thought they had been slowly breaking Hermione out of her habit of over-thinking every situation. Hermione had then saved the situation by relying on her instincts, and changing Harry's frown of disappointment into a goofy grin. "We'll help you with staying out of Dumbledore's way, he's not someone I think any of us want to be around. Miss Granger there may just have suffered a brain fart, but Neville and I never doubted you for a second."

It was a blushing Hermione who tried to tease back, desperate to put her clanger behind her. "I'll have you know, Miss Patil, that young ladies do not suffer from flatulence - of any kind. I will admit to having a moment worthy of Ronald Weasley ..."

Her boyfriend interrupted before she could say any more. "Thanks for that vote of confidence guys. Em, Hermione, please don't take this the wrong way. I would rather think my girlfriend suffered from the occasional brain fart than she was in any way comparable to Ronald Weasley." The kiss on the cheek that came with this comment confirmed to Hermione that Harry had forgiven his girlfriend's faux-pas. For that, he could call it whatever the hell he wanted.

Turning his attention to Neville, Harry again pushed the conversation into an uncomfortable area. "I said you were the closest thing to family I had left, Neville, I still believe that. Because of this, there's something I want to ask. The next time you visit St Mungo's, could I go too? I would really like to meet my godmother."

Neville's head was now down but he drew comfort from Padma's arm slipping back around him. This was a subject he found incredibly difficult to talk about yet these were his friends, Harry even considered him family. "She won't know you, Harry, she doesn't know me. We take her some sweets my gran says were mum's favourite. She eats the sweet and then slips the wrapper into my hand, gran says to throw them away but I like to think of it as a present from my mum. I've kept every single one, I have them all carefully folded in a drawer in my bedroom."

As he slowly and painfully told his story, they could all see the moisture gathering in Neville's eyes. To be honest, his three friends were suffering from the same condition.

"Neville, the goblin healers have a lot of experience with this curse, my father is going to offer their expertise to your gran when we meet over the holidays. They may not be able to do anything, but it couldn't hurt to try. The offer is being made because your mum is my godmother, any steps toward good relations that come from this is purely a secondary benefit."

Padma could practically feel the surge of hope that rushed through Neville. She agreed with Harry, there really was nothing to lose. His second comment prodded something that had been fermenting at the back of her mind, Padma decided just to ask her friend about what was troubling her. "Harry, why are Gringotts pushing so hard for better relations with wizards? It goes against everything I've ever heard about goblins."

Knowing they deserved the truth, Harry laid it out for them. "The very pureblood policies that are slowly killing the magical community are having the same effect on Gringotts. It's all about maintaining power, and bloodlines. You two are purebloods and will probably have betrothals negotiated for you, I understand in some families they are even considering cousins now as spouses."

The betrothal comment added a green tinge to Neville's complexion but Harry continued before anyone commented on it.

"They are so desperate to hold onto their power that every year, brilliant and talented witches and wizards are forced to leave Britain. This is simply because they don't possess the proper ancestry to be considered for decent jobs or as proper spouses. In a few weeks, the seventh year's will graduate and discover that the bigotry in Hogwarts was only a sample of what they'll be faced with in magical Britain. These policies not only effect Hermione's future, but mine too."

He turned toward his girlfriend, "You've seen some of our city under Gringotts and, while it's large, that's all there is. In Britain, witches and wizards outnumber goblins by at least ten to one. Current ministry policy prohibits goblins living anywhere else but under Gringotts, causing us the same problems as you. Every year, more and more bright young goblins are deciding their future doesn't lie in pureblood controlled Britain, and are heading off to less restrictive countries. With an ageing population and increasing numbers of younger goblins leaving, we are only a few generations away from serious population decline. Now perhaps you can see why we're pushing for this?"

Harry's story had them enthralled. "We don't even know if this will work but have to be able to show some progress to stand any chance of slowing the numbers leaving, putting even more pressure on the decision I've got to make about my future. Not all goblins will

get behind this plan though, we have our fair share of bigotry too. There are those who, if Dursley had left me on their desk, would have fed me to a dragon and considered there being one less wizard in the world as a good place to start."

This drew a yelp of fear from Hermione, and saw her burrowing even closer into her boyfriend. "My father is a very clever goblin, he saw the possibilities immediately. His original intention was simply for Harry Potter to turn up at Hogwarts and be sympathetic to goblin views. As I grew up, it was me who kept pushing for more. Extra tuition in history, economics, languages - anything to make my father proud of me and show him, and the nation, he was right to adopt a young wizard called Harry. Being awarded centurion status was way beyond anything we could have ever dreamed of."

His attention was once more focused on Neville. "Our healers were able to remove that fragment of Voldemort out of my head, the only solution the wizards have is to hit the 'container' with a killing curse." This drew yelps from his three friends but Harry was determined to get his point across. "I'm not saying our healers are better, Neville, just different. Since there has been a lot of study into that curse, those differences just might be able to help your parents."

Neville was holding on to the glimmer of hope this offered. "Harry, I will talk to my gran about this, and you visiting. I think you're right, we really have nothing to lose."

"My father knows far more about this than I do, the two of them can chat about it when we're all on holiday."

That feeling of having barely scratched the surface of goblin culture was back with a vengeance, something Harry had now mentioned twice was niggling at Hermione so she asked her boyfriend if he could explain it. "Why have the goblins done a lot of research on that particular curse?"

Realising that this would be something that could affect the Longbottoms' final decision, Harry told his friends some information that had been conveniently forgotten by wizards. "It's called the torture curse for a very specific reason, about four hundred years ago this vile thing was invented by the British Ministry of Magic - for the sole purpose of torturing captured goblins."

This was met by a trio of disbelieving stares. "Goblins are pretty tough, beating them up or breaking bones doesn't usually get you much information - other than having your circumstances of birth questioned. The ministry had a war on their hands and needed information from their prisoners, something new was needed. The curse was supposed to be kept secret, not much chance of that happening in the ministry. It was only after the war was over that this particular curse was classed as an unforgivable, when wizards started using it on other wizards. Ministry law states that using this curse on a human being can see the caster get a life sentence in Azkaban, you do remember what ministerial department deals with goblins?"

All three friends were struggling to answer that without using the word 'barbaric', Hermione though had jumped to a different situation. "Does that mean Lucius Malfoy could have cast the torture curse on you that day in defence class and nothing would have been done?"

"Technically yes, though my knife would have been buried in his chest before Malfoy could cast. We're classed as dangerous beasts, Hermione, is it any wonder goblins are leaving Britain? If Gringotts ever reach the stage where we have to bring in staff from abroad, it would be the beginning of the end. We would need to pay them a higher salary to compensate for the poor conditions in Britain, meaning the bank would have to charge its customers more - our only alternative would be to close Gringotts. Either way, there are no winners."

Padma checked her watch and got a surprise. "Guys, we've been chatting for ages. If we don't get a move on, we'll miss curfew."

They were heading back to their dorms and Neville was enjoying Padma holding his arm, she'd been there for him tonight when he needed a friend. Harry's words from earlier struck another chord, and Neville didn't want Padma's hand on his arm replaced by that of a stranger his gran picked out. "Can we extend our dating deal to include betrothals? If our families see us close, then maybe they won't start negotiations with people we don't know."

It was a shocked Padma who had to clarify what her friend just said. "Are you sure, Neville, I would hate to think I was taking advantage of you?"

"We're friends and have a lot of fun together. You would be doing me a favour, some of those girls scare the life out of me. I'm not talking about becoming boyfriend and girlfriend, just being good friends and looking out for one another. If you get a boyfriend, I would be fine with that."

Padma knew Neville Longbottom would be considered quite the catch, he was also someone she really liked and was delighted he wasn't looking to be her boyfriend - yet. "I can live with that, though I think it's you who'll get a girlfriend first."

Neville just smiled with relief, giving Padma a friendly hug before saying goodnight to his friends and entering Gryffindor. The three Ravensclaws headed for their own house, with Hermione nervously asking Harry if they were okay.

"A misunderstanding that we talked out, we're fine, Hermione. I knew what not knowing why I wasn't going to sit those exams must be doing to you, I should have spoken to you earlier. I was just so busy trying to figure out how much I could tell Padma and Neville, sorry too about the history lesson that turned into."

With Neville safely tucked up in Gryffindor, Padma could now focus her attention on the Ravenclaw couple. She'd been surprised and delighted at how open Harry had been tonight, even Neville had crawled out of that shell of his a little more. "Oh don't be daft, Harry. apologising to Hermione for extra lessons! You put a lot of trust in us tonight, and offered Neville some hope. I'll spare you another Patil sister jumping you for a hug and just say thank you for that."

The three friends made curfew with mere minutes to spare.

-oOoOo-

Gordon had heard fanciful tales of this special room inside Hogwarts, watching those four leave breakfast and head off for the second morning that weekend had him determined to investigate.

His patchy information led him to this seventh floor corridor where he made straight for the only door that was available. Upon entering, he couldn't have began to describe what the room looked like, probably because Gordon couldn't take his eyes off the boy.



Harry had a metallic shield over his left forearm and that knife of his held in that same hand, this was because he was wielding the sword of Gryffindor in his right hand. A kilt would have dated him back when the highlanders fought the English redcoats, though the redcoats never fired spells at their enemies.

The boy was fighting two duelling dummies, these were the top of the range versions that actually fought back. His three friends were cheering him on while the redheaded tutor studied a stopwatch.

"Time!" This led to much cheering, before they noticed Gordon. Harry's smile vanished as he made his way to confront his uninvited and unwelcome visitor.

"Can we help you, Mr McPhee?"

Gordon couldn't miss that neither sword nor knife were returned to their sheaths, the boy was ready for battle. "When I heard you received extra tutoring in defence, I was naturally curious..."

"My father pays for private tutoring in defence, and that's exactly what it is - private. I would like you to leave, now."

Not believing the cheek of this brat, Gordon addressed himself directly to Bill. "Do you allow your students to talk to ministry officials like this?"

"I work for Gringotts, not the ministry or Hogwarts. My job here is to teach these four to fight, you are disrupting my lesson."

Gordon focused once more on the boy. He'd come here for information and intended to get it, one way or another. "If you've been trained to fight, let's see you throw me out this room." This would at least provide Gordon with a measure of this boy's capabilities. The idea that he could be forcibly ejected from the room never even crossed the examiners mind, he was looking forward to wiping the smirk of this brat's face.

"Okay, sir, goodbye!"

Gordon thought he was ready for anything but the boy turning his back and returning to his friends caught him by surprise. A stinging hex to his arse should enrage the brat enough to fight, that was

when the second surprise kicked in. The examiner couldn't move a muscle as vines suddenly had him tied like a joint of butchered beef, his feet then left the floor as he shot toward the door. Gordon hadn't seen the boy cast a spell yet here he was, flying through the open door and smacking straight into the tapestry that was hanging in the corridor.

His bindings may have vanished but it still took a moment to untangle himself from the tapestry and get his bearings. What was throwing those bearings off was the lack of a door he'd just been thrown through. None of his diagnostic spells returned any evidence of a room existing, a room he'd been standing in moments before. He was going to be in the castle until Friday and would be keeping a close eye on those four. His report to Dolores would certainly make interesting reading, though he now agreed with her this boy was a threat to their way of life.

"Sorry about that, guys, Hogwarts will make sure we're not disturbed again."

"Just as well we were running defence drills, and you weren't firing curses from your sword. How did it feel holding both weapons and your shield?" Bill was pleased to see the honesty once more shine through in Harry's answer.

"It felt slightly awkward, but I think that's more because this is an attacking configuration - and I wasn't allowed to attack. Using two blades that can cast spells proved successful against Master Sharpshard but it would leave me too open against multiple opponents, especially if they had wands. That's why I wanted to add my shield. Can I try it again, where I can fight back?"

Bill nodded and started his stopwatch, what they saw next threw any concept of time out the door quicker than Hogwarts had got rid of McPhee. Harry was suddenly in full Centurion armour and charging the dummies, he moved like liquid gold as he dodged and deflected curses while laying down a double barrage of his own. The dummies had been programmed by wizards on how to respond to attacks, they had no program designed for an attack like this. Harry was on them in seconds, and you didn't need a stopwatch to know the fight was over only a couple of heartbeats later.

His shield knocked the dummy's wand arm away as the knife he now held in that hand did the real damage. As the shield did its job, Harry's knife slashed across the dummy's torso before a blasting curse sent it spinning backward. If anything, it got off lightly. The other dummy lost its wand arm to the sword that then buried itself into the artificial torso of its opponent. A banishing charm saw dummy number two then fly across the room along with the first one, leaving both lying in a tangled heap.

Harry stood panting, though more with adrenalin rush than effort, as the other four watched while only the ticking of Bill's forgotten stopwatch broke the stunned silence. It was predictably Padma who had something to say.

"Wow, Harry, McPhee doesn't know how lucky he was that Hogwarts threw him out the room and not you. That was scary to watch from here, I never want to be on the other end of it."

"Thanks, Padma. I felt as if I'd been ignoring the goblin part of me for too long, that's how I would fight - against goblins or wizards. What do you think, Curse-breaker?"

The words were out before Bill had time to think of what he was saying. "I reckon any wizard seeing you charging like that would shit themselves." It was only the giggling coming from his other three students that alerted him he'd said something inappropriate. "I also think we might need new training dummies, dummies we might need to put armour on - if you are going to attack like that. Really devastating attack, Harry - and no webbing."

"I learned my lesson with Master Sharpshard, put your opponent out of the fight so they can't attack you again."

Bill didn't know if a reparo would actually work on the dummies so had them on shield drills for the remainder of the lesson. He asked Harry for a quiet word, after escorting them to the great hall for lunch. Ducking outside for a moment provided the privacy they needed. Bill didn't waste time and got right to the heart of the matter.

"My father is determined to invite Ginny to this ball, he thinks her sitting at your table would be a father making a daughter's dream come true. I wanted to check that you were okay with this arrangement?"

This drew a frown from Harry. "When we suggested three tickets for the Weasley family, we assumed you would be the third guest."

This was actually an embarrassing situation his father had placed Bill in, and didn't bode well for future wizard / goblin negotiations. "My father had no sisters, and then six sons before Ginny was born, he dotes on her. It's actually killing him waiting on Fudge making his goblin announcement to the Wizengamot so he can tell Ginny she's invited to the ball."

This left Harry shaking his head as another potential problem raised its head. "You do know we are all going to the nation's tailors and having our clothes made for the ball? There will be five girls sitting there in a certain style of dress and your sister will be the odd one out. If she wears the same as the rest of us, it could be construed as the ministry already bending over backwards to please the goblins. It is well known Susan is already part of our group, and will be on holiday with us, so her dressed like us won't matter. Ginny is a totally different case since her father will be the ministry's direct link to the nation."

Harry thought hard for a minute before answering. "I have no objection to your sister being there, though not at the expense of even one vote being changed against us. I think you'll need to run this past my father, I will happily abide with what he decides."

The senior Weasley was supposed to be the ministry's leading expert on muggles, it would seem he had a bit to go to get his head around goblins. It would be interesting to hear Dan and Emma's opinion of the man, after meeting him at the ball.

-oOoOo-

Fudge had judged his moment perfectly. Half the Wizengamot were almost asleep, and the other half couldn't wait for this session to finish so they could get back to their own lives. As Dumbledore asked if there was any other business, the minister stood before the old fool could bring his hammer down.

"Excuse me Chief Warlock, I have a matter to bring before the members. It concerns the ministry summer ball, an event that has all of Europe talking - and scrambling for tickets." This drew a few

laughs, Johnny Foreigner wanting to attend their event, and not being able to get tickets, was considered the way things should be by most of this body.

"This is easily the premier event on this year's social calendar, and one that I know we're all looking forward to. Why I'm standing before you today is to inform this body that the event nearly never took place."

He now had everyone's complete attention so Cornelius pressed on with his presentation. "A brave young man will become this country's youngest ever recipient of an Order of Merlin, First Class. Now, through no fault of his, if anyone at the ministry wants to officially contact young Harry, our own laws state it must be done through the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. Labelling young Harry as a creature is not something I can stand here and support, that is why I am proposing legislative changes for this house to consider."

This created a right hullabaloo, with Cornelius and Amelia the only calm people in the chamber. Even Albus had worked himself into a state, though that was more likely to be because he didn't know any of this beforehand. The minister knew they would all be running scenarios through their heads, attempting to second guess what he was up to. His hope was that, when he provided details of his proposal, they would see it was nowhere near as bad as they were now considering.

When the first challenge came, Cornelius was disappointed - he now owed Amelia five galleons as she had predicted correctly.

"Hem, hem, excuse me, Minister. Surely you don't expect the Department of International Magical Cooperation to now incorporate our liaisons with goblins?"

"No, Madam Umbridge, I was suggesting no such thing. That raises a very interesting point though. Both members of the Crouch family only received justice because young Harry passed information to Madam Bones through her niece, who's a friend of Harry's at Hogwarts. That department now has a new head because of that information. It also highlights a need for a more direct channel to a nation that every single person in this chamber, with the exception of Albus Dumbledore, does business with."

This actually generated some sniggers in the chamber, and broadcast to everyone just how far Dumbledore's star had waned when he was a figure of ridicule for the minister to have a pop at.

It was time for Cornelius to reveal his plan to the chamber. "We currently have a department that deals exclusively with muggles, mainly the misuse of their artefacts. My proposal would see that department tasked to take on our relationship with the goblin nation, and its current head promoted to handle all the ministry's dealings with both. As many of you will already know, Arthur's oldest son is currently employed by Gringotts as a curse breaker - and as a personal tutor to young Harry."

That last morsel was indeed news to many, though welcome news. "Through this very fortuitous link, a preliminary inquiry allows me to stand before this chamber with the complete proposal you'll hear today. While the ministry would be represented by Arthur Weasley, the goblin nation have proposed Senior Accounts Manager Barchoke to be their Ambassador to the ministry. This chamber may know him better as the goblin young Harry calls father..."

This was a bombshell that silenced the chamber. If they rejected this proposal, they would effectively be rejecting the boy-who-lived's father.

Umbridge came back for more. "Hem, hem, excuse me again, Minister. Just what powers will this new department have?"

"Madam Umbridge, I'm surprised at you! This proposal is not about granting any one person or department the ability to make sweeping changes, have you forgotten that only this chamber has the power to make any alterations to our laws. The new department will be tasked with opening a dialog between ourselves and others. If, in the course of time, this dialog leads to any proposed changes in those laws, it will then be debated and voted on in this chamber. I believe Barchoke is also considering having William Weasley as his assistant, hoping this will help avoid any issues of protocol from delaying this project becoming a working entity."

This drew nods of agreement all around the chamber, two purebloods should be more than able to keep a goblin in line. It wasn't even as if the ministry would be granting them a great boon,

classing goblins the same as muggles wasn't much of a step-up. If it meant they had a way to intervene when Gringotts threatened to close another pureblood's vault, it would be well worth the goblins meagre gain in status.

Dolores just couldn't leave it alone though, she was like a dog with a bone it didn't want to be parted from. "Minister, are you aware the boy in question declared publicly that he wouldn't be sitting his O.W.L.'s?"

Cornelius had been prepared for this, and understood he had to kill this story stone dead. "I am aware of Harry's declaration, and the circumstances surrounding why he made it. I have spoken to Harry on many occasions, and Madam's Bones and Longbottom will be holidaying with him over the summer. I'm sure I can speak for all three of us and say we are of the opinion that he is a fine young man. We are also aware how he reacts to attempts to manipulate him, especially by Headmaster Dumbledore. We have four years yet before he needs to make the final decision on that subject, and we all know a lot can change in four years."

Here was the minister's clearest indication that Dumbledore was on his way out. The entire Wizengamot had witnessed the boy's reaction to Dumbledore in this very chamber, so it was Cornelius who was being believed here - despite Albus' strong protest.

The minister still had the floor and finished his presentation. "The normal period for proposed legislation like this to sit before this chamber is forty days. I do not want to face the accusation of rushing this through the chamber, so I am proposing we defer voting on this until the third of August."

Amelia immediately seconded that proposal and, with no one willing to publicly put their name to an objection, the proposal was passed.

Albus still sat in his seat, even although the chamber had now emptied. He was supposed to be the great manipulator, but Cornelius Fudge had just ran rings around him in a chamber he previously owned. The old wizard though was grudgingly forced to admit this was a work of sheer genius, even down to the date of the vote. Instead of allowing extra time for members to organise their debate, Cornelius had craftily scheduled the vote to be right after the

ball. People would enjoy themselves that Friday night, then come to this chamber Monday morning to vote.

He had attempted to get William Weasley to work for him, and been vigorously rebuffed at every turn. Yet Cornelius not only managed it, the minister apparently had Barchoke onside too. Scholarships, Order of Merlin ball and an ambassador, everyone walking away from the table thinking they got what they wanted. Albus found himself tipping his hat to Cornelius and Amelia as the pair made their way back into the chamber and headed toward him.

"Very well played, Cornelius, very well played indeed."

"We're not there yet, Albus, and you're forcing me to do something I really don't want to. This is a very prestigious event, an event that I can't have anyone upsetting the guest of honour over the course of the evening. You have proven time and time again that you cannot leave young Harry in peace, therefore I can't take the chance of you being there. Sorry, Albus, but you are barred from the ministry ball."

He really only had one question. "Did Harry or his father ask you to do this?"

"No, they know nothing about this. The two of you in the same room is too much temptation for you not to interfere, it was my decision not to allow that to happen."

Both walked away and left Albus sitting there a broken man.

Albus was actually trying to decide if he could bring himself to play the last card he held, giving up Severus to Barchoke. The goblin's comment about seeking him out on Harry's birthday now made perfect sense, Barchoke fully expected Albus to be at the ball. For Albus not to attend would send signals around Britain, and even Europe, that his days in a position of power were numbered. Whatever decision he made about Severus was now pushed a couple of weeks closer by this, he would need that time to convince Barchoke and Harry that he should be invited to the ball.

-oOoOo-



They left their history exam arm in arm, Hermione stretched up and kissed Harry on the cheek before resting her head on his shoulder as they walked.

"Why thank you, Miss, and pray tell what I did to receive such an honour. I want to make sure I repeat it, often."

Hermione couldn't help but laugh at the playfulness of her boyfriend, the pressure was now off all of them. "Our last exam, Harry, they're all over. Normally I would be worrying myself sick by this point, going over every paper in my head and working out how many points I had dropped. Now, I've got you, we've got friends and a whole summer to look forward to. The first ten days jumping between all our homes and getting prepared for the ball, then we're off on a world wide adventure. I've never been this happy that school is ending, in fact, I've never been this happy!"

This earned Hermione a return kiss on the cheek before Padma interrupted.

"It's too nice a day to sit inside, let's grab some food from the hall and eat it down by the lake?"

This proved to be such a popular idea that most of first year ended up down by the water, the summer holidays were just around the corner.

A/N thanks for reading.

A/N2 it's official, Britain has just had it's 2nd wettest year since records began. As a cyclist, I didn't need people with Ph.D's and supercomputers to tell me that - it started raining at the end of March and still hasn't stopped! Evening classes in ark building are proving rather popular.

## Chapter 33

Albus sat at the leaving feast and couldn't remember when he'd experienced a worst year at Hogwarts. The reason for his personal annus horribilis was sitting at the Ravenclaw table, along with two Gryffindors and a couple of Hufflepuffs. While they had remained at their own tables as Slytherin were awarded the House and Quidditch cups, the four first years had moved toward Ravenclaw as soon as the feast commenced.

He'd since learned that this group would not only be holidaying together, they were attending the ministry ball as Harry's guests. Harry would have muggles, a goblin, a veela and a wizarding family from India as guests at his table. This was certainly a provocative mixture - yet Albus Dumbledore was the one barred from attending. Unlike Cinderella, Albus didn't need a fairy godmother - being perfectly capable of transfiguring his own horse and carriage. Glass slippers or a suitable wardrobe wouldn't cause him any trouble either. His problem was that, while Cinderella had an invitation to the ball, Albus Dumbledore didn't!

An even bigger shock to Albus though was the reactions of both Weasley parents at his visit to their home. After reading of Arthur's potential new position at the ministry, Albus had thought this would give him an 'in' to what was happening with the goblins - and more importantly, Harry. To say he'd been given short shrift at the Burrow was putting it mildly.

Molly had delivered a personal howler from as close as her rather large bosom and their height discrepancies allowed, Albus was hoping everyone had forgotten the Quirrell incident. Arthur then took over the hazing from his wife before practically throwing him out of the Burrow, apparently endangering four of their children and then attempting to blackmail their eldest son was not appreciated by the Weasley family.

Barchoke's deadline of Harry's birthday also caused scheduling problems, since the goblin was going to be out the country for most of the summer and their meeting at the ball was now no longer an option. Albus was left with no choice but to pass a message to Barchoke through Sirius, at least the answer took some pressure off. The Goblin was prepared to wait until the beginning of next term, giving Albus the entire summer to make up his mind.

Albus was still torn though, he badly needed an opening to get closer to the boy as every other door he'd tried had been slammed in his face. With the celebratory ball causing a stir, and the proposed new goblin initiative, he couldn't see any way Severus could survive being 'outed' as the person who gave Voldemort the prophecy - leading directly to the Potter's being murdered. His potions professor would draw scant comfort from the great hall being bedecked in green and silver if this was his last summer as a free man.

Hogwarts deputy though held polar opposite views to those of the headmaster. Apart from Slytherin house winning both trophies, Minerva thought this had been a stellar year. Her tough stance on discipline may have seen quite a number of students on probation but had improved all the student's general behaviour by a noticeable amount. With a line drawn, and the consequences for crossing it known, Hogwarts had purred along nicely since Christmas.

You then had to factor-in the new history curriculum and its professor, plus completely changing the way transfiguration was being taught to first year. It was also hard to dismiss the impact Harry's private tutors were having on the school. Bill Weasley was not only teaching most of first year, his revision classes for students facing O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. had been very well attended. The Weasley twins had actually come to Minerva with Master Pitslay's opinion that they would be beyond O.W.L. level by next summer, and could sit their exams a year early if they wished. Both had actually confided in their Head of House that Harry was well ahead of them.

Minerva noticed that it wasn't just Slytherin who were celebrating. It looked like the group of mixed first years sitting at the Ravenclaw table were ready to party too, and their good cheer was spreading to the rest of the hall. Albus may be disappointed that Harry Potter didn't come to Hogwarts but Minerva thought Harry Crow had been the conduit through which all the positive changes had flowed.

Minerva couldn't help but smile at the thought she would be seeing this group over the summer, not only at the ball but when they met to shop with the Potter scholarship students. The woman with the reputation for being the strictest person in Hogwarts had probably smiled more this year than any other since she started teaching here.

-oOoOo-

There weren't too many smiles at Kings Cross after the express arrived. That wasn't strictly true though, Emma, Dan and Sirius all thought it was funny the way Hermione and Harry were holding on to each other - as if they would never see the other again. Gone was Harry's stoic public face and Hermione actually had tears in her eyes at the thought of being parted. After a couple of minutes of this, Emma leaned toward Sirius.

"Dan and I are actually working next week, we finish up for the holidays on Friday. How about we take them both home with us for the weekend, and then Harry can use his portkey on Monday morning?"

"The alternative would be these two mopping around their houses, poor Eargit would end up knackered carrying their letters back and forth. I think that's a great idea, I'll let his father know to expect them Monday morning. Would it be okay if they spent a couple of days at my house? Henrica's going to be very busy at Gringotts for the first half of the holidays."

Dan was trying to appear miffed at this arrangement, and failing miserably. Emma made no attempt to hide her excitement at having them home, though she could still tease the man who had quickly become a good friend to both her and Dan. "You have a library, Sirius, we may never see them again. Just go, and we'll see how long these two take to notice you've left."

Harry's goblin upbringing was telling him this was totally irrational, but it didn't help one bit. He also knew they were meeting up next weekend to get their outfits for the ball, that just made him feel worse. His head told him he'd be fine but Harry's heart was screaming it couldn't last a week without Hermione's hugs. She'd gotten him addicted since the first day they met, it was an addiction he had no intention of fighting. That Hermione apparently felt exactly the same was the reason they were still standing on the platform, long after everyone else had left. He didn't know how long they had been standing there but it was now quiet, a state that couldn't exist when Sirius was around.

Harry removed that hair he loved so much from his eyes, to see a pair of parents smirking at him. With no sign of his godfather

anywhere, he was forced to ask the obvious question. "Do you know where Sirius is?"

This got his girlfriend's attention, she recognised the smirks on her parent's faces at once. They were up to something.

Dan didn't keep them waiting. "Oh, he got fed up waiting on you two to let go of each other - your godfather left ages ago! I suppose that means we've got a lodger for the weekend, but only if you take Hermione with you to Gringotts on Monday?"

Dan was soon experiencing his own personal patented 'Hermione hug'. He wasn't sure if it was her sword fencing or all the practice his daughter was getting with hugging Harry, but Hermione could now make his ribs creak with the ferocity of her embrace. She quickly moved on to her mother, any thoughts of the blues banished now that Harry was coming home with them.

The boy in question had a mad grin on his face, and finally remembered to answer Dan. "That would be...bloody fantastic!"

Lucius had watched all this from the shadows, still hoping for a break. He'd easily discovered where the Patils lived, the information proved useless though. In the middle of a moonless night, he'd attempted to get close to the house - purely on a fact-finding mission. The arm that Voldemort branded all those years ago was burning as if it was going to burst into flames, this was before he could get anywhere near the house too! Lucius was forced to get out of there fast, just in case his mere presence had triggered an alarm.

If the Patil home had wards like that, Lucius was glad he didn't know the mudblood's address. This little bint was already the one person who possessed the power to completely destroy this boy, unfortunately she would also be the best protected. Even slipping her the book in Diagon Alley wouldn't help, the wards around her house would probably fry Tom's diary the instant she returned home. With the Patils being equally protected, this left the head of the Malfoy family with a bit of a dilemma.

Did he pass the book off to some nonentity, like that Chinese witch - or even blood traitor Weasley's daughter - or did he wait until the last minute and take an attempt at a bigger prize. He knew they would all be here come eleven o'clock on the first of September, a

packed platform should provide the cover for him to slip the slim volume into an unsuspecting pocket. Lucius understood this would be a massive risk, leaving everything to the very last moment. He also acknowledged there would need to be a large slice of luck involved too for him to achieve the result he wanted.

Lucius could console himself with the thought that, if he couldn't get anyone close to the boy, he could still ensure the diary made its way home to Hogwarts in some poor, unsuspecting child's pocket.

-oOoOo-

Harry was trying to be there for his friend as they both made their way along the St. Mungo's corridor, it was as if Neville was experiencing every emotion humanly possible with each step that took him nearer to his parents' room. There was joy, yet tinged with sadness - excitement flavoured with trepidation. This was clearly something he looked forward to, but at the same time dreaded.

"Harry, just don't expect too much..."

"Neville, I'm going to meet my godmother and your dad, that's more than enough for me."

Augusta walked behind them both, not having words to express how proud she was of her grandson. He had changed beyond all recognition from the timid little boy she'd practically had to force onto the Hogwarts express last September, and Augusta knew who was responsible for this dramatic transformation - his friends.

The way they had set this summer's holiday itinerary, it was one week busy - followed by seven days of rest. Because of her age, Augusta had no wish to hold the youngster's back. She gave the first week in Florida a miss, joining them in the Turkish villa beside the Black Sea. There she spent one of the best weeks of her life, listening to her grandson try to explain this whole other world they'd visited in Florida.

She also watched him like a hawk, delighted with what her old eyes were seeing. The group of four were even closer than she remembered, with Padma and Neville always being together. The affection they had for each other was clearly visible, giving his grandmother hope she might actually see him settled with a good

wife and family before her time came to leave this world behind. The Longbottoms were purebloods, and proud of their heritage. The family didn't let that fact define them though, she would be ecstatic if her grandson decided on either of these girls.

She had spent the week in the very good company of the Grangers, with Barchoke and Sirius dividing the week between them - both had business in Gringotts to occupy the rest of their time. Watching this loving couple care for the children made a nonsense of all that pureblood dogma, and the academic results from Hogwarts bore this out. Minerva had confided in her that Neville was not only the top first year student in Gryffindor, he placed seventh overall amongst all his peers. Augusta expected that his three Ravenclaw friends finished higher, and was fine with that. That there were nine Ravenclaws in first year meant her grandson had out-performed at least three of the cleverest house, that was totally unexpected and a phenomenal achievement on his part.

When the youngsters had tired themselves out with swimming and games through the day, the adults then got to spend quiet evenings sipping drinks and enjoying each other's company. Each were fascinated by the others and the subjects discussed were wide and varied. Neville had talked with her about the offer of help for Frank and Alice, Augusta was more than willing to listen. Watching them for the last ten years had left her ready to talk to the Devil himself if it offered the slightest glimpse of hope.

Barchoke had arrived with some goblin ale for the youngsters earlier that day, and it was this he was drinking as the four sat watching the sun go down. It was time for the serious conversation. "Augusta, the last thing I want to do here is raise any false hopes for you or Neville. Our experience has taught us that there are no absolutes when dealing with victims of this curse, and that no two victims react the same to the treatment. I have to be honest here and say that sometimes there is no reaction at all, and we have never attempted this treatment on victims after such an extended period since their exposure."

Dan asked for an explanation of the treatment, and what it hoped to achieve.

"This curse is a vicious thing, Dan, the most disgusting curse ever invented. While the Avada Kedarva kills its victims, it is

instantaneous and therefore relatively painless. The cruciatus curse triggers every nerve ending in your body to send messages of great pain to your brain."

As dentists, Dan and Emma were used to dealing with people in pain. Neither could wrap their heads around a body coping with that much agony.

"The wizarding theory is that a body can only stand so much pain, before reverting to madness. Forgive me ladies but we goblins think that is a pile of dragon shit. One of the differences between goblins and wizards is that we question everything and anything, and are constantly trying to find better answers to most problems. Goblin pride was also at stake here, the very thought of a pain so terrible that it would drive us into this madness was repugnant to our nation. A lot of research was done to discover that Mother Nature is indeed wondrous."

Barchoke certainly had the other three's attention but he was no healer, he offered the explanation that had made sense to him. "The treatment is purely potions based. Not possessing the specialised knowledge of how they work on the mind, this is how I understand it. Living underground, fire is essential - it can also be a dangerous thing. A fire breaking out is usually a minor matter, easily dealt with. Should one happen when we're sleeping, taking hold before it can be brought under control, we have stringent evacuation procedures and choke points where the fire can be contained from spreading. We have discovered our bodies react in a similar fashion, closing down routes to the brain in an attempt to keep itself alive."

He could see they were following his explanation so continued. "The fact that a patient is still alive shows the body was successful in this most basic function, though we have no way of measuring the damage done. Our treatment is like the clean-up crews who move in after the fire has burned itself out. Repairing the damage and rebuilding, making that section habitable once more. As you can imagine, no two fires are ever the same and sometime it takes years for a section to recover."

"Emma and I are well aware of the measures the body can take to protect itself, though neither of us could be considered experts on the subject. What we could offer is a way to assess the damage and



measure any progress. There are private clinics with machines that can measure brain activity and perform scans inside your head."

Watching the reaction to her husband's revelations, Emma felt she needed to clarify something. "These procedures are entirely non-invasive and totally pain-free, sometimes an indicator dye will be injected into an arm to provide better images but that's the only thing that may be required. Mostly the patient undergoing these tests just lay on a bed. We could look into getting a full range of tests done before any treatment, those same tests carried out say six months later would provide proof of what effect your treatment was having."

This was something Barchoke was not expecting and immediately asked Dan if he could get more information on these procedures for their healers. He then turned his attention back to Augusta. "In a small number of cases, this treatment has brought about a complete reversal of the damage caused. I think we have to be realistic and say that is probably unlikely when dealing with patients who suffered this curse so long ago. Sadly, there are those that show no improvement, we can only hope they don't fall into this category. Between these extremes lie different degrees of recovery that are as wide as the sea currently in front of us. Would a mother recognising her son, or a son recognising his mother be considered a success? Only you and Neville could really answer that."

Augusta had been glad of the glass of port in her hand that evening, it helped her distill the entire problem down to one question - did she trust these people? With that question instantly answered, the rest was easy. The Grangers had made some calls and Sirius had picked up the brochures that had been delivered to their home. Augusta hadn't been able to make head nor tail of these glossy coloured pages but everything looked 'safe', Barchoke admitted the copies Sirius had dropped off at Gringotts had left their healers drooling at the possibilities this would provide.

At the end of their week, Augusta had parted company with the group. They were heading off to Rome, where the rest of the Patil family would be joining them for a week of sightseeing. She had been busy making arrangements of her own, arrangements that would come into play today. They had the ministry ball tomorrow and then the entire group was heading off to spend a nice quiet and restful week in the Maldives, though, with their numbers swelling to seventeen, Augusta questioned how quiet it might be.

She entered the room to find precisely what she expected, her son and his wife in exactly the same condition as they had been for the last decade. This state of affairs was no longer acceptable to the acting head of the Longbottom family, not now that she knew there were possible alternatives. St Mungo's were about to discover that Augusta's reputation as a formidable witch was well earned, and she was about to add some new chapters to that reputation today.

-oOoOo-

The portkey had barely deposited the father and son to the Grangers' back garden when Harry was running for the door. The way he was feeling, only one thing would help. Hermione was waiting with open arms and soon both were wrapped in a needed hug.

"How did it go?"

Barchoke took a moment to watch the distress flowing out of his son before answering. "Augusta said it went exactly as planned, Frank and Alice are traveling by private ambulance to the clinic. After some tests, they'll spend the night there before more tests tomorrow and then heading back to London. Those nurses Augusta found will stay with them on rotating shifts and then, after returning to the city, portkey with Neville's parents into Gringotts. Neville appeared every bit as upset as Harry, he could have done with Padma there too."

Just being in his girlfriend's arms had calmed Harry enough that he could answer. "She'll be there tonight for Neville's birthday, Padma's like Hermione and seems to know instinctively what to do. I've not been here five minutes but already I'm feeling better."

He gave his girlfriend a kiss on the cheek in thanks before continuing. "It's easy to see why the sorting hat couldn't put Neville anywhere else but Gryffindor, walking down that corridor when you know what's waiting at the other end takes real courage. We have to help them, father, whatever it takes!"

"We will, son, everything we possibly can will be done. These tests will also tell us if the muggle doctors have any way of treating this, our healers were very impressed that these facilities existed - far less could be used on anyone."

Emma was now busy fussing over Harry and making sure he was feeling better, it was Dan who followed up on that. "Our doctors are always striving to increase their knowledge of how our brains work, they may be able to offer some form of help."

"We find it strange but refreshing that your healers are so willing to share information between each other, it must make things so much easier?"

"We have dentistry publications that are periodically delivered to our practice, as do most dentists in Britain. They not only keep us up to date with any new developments in procedures and technology, they have information on anything interesting that's happening in dentistry anywhere in the world. For at least a hundred and fifty years, the Lancet has been providing the same function for doctors the world over. Shared information in that publication has led to more than a few medical breakthroughs."

The more time Barchoke spent with these people, the more he found his views on the world changing. Seeing Harry was back to himself with Hermione at his side reminded Barchoke there was another matter he wanted to discuss with the Grangers. It would require the use of their memory viewer though.

Only Barchoke had seen this before and could understand the shock, fear and anger that he found himself surrounded by. The memory ended as Harry approached the stricken Hermione and her golden protection dissolved back into her bracelet. Harry and Hermione were of course in each other's arms, but Emma had them both in an embrace and she didn't appear ready for letting go any time soon. Dan was very angry that Hermione had been hurt but incredibly moved at the way Harry had fought like a demon to avenge her.

He'd gotten to know Barchoke though and understood they hadn't just watched this as a means of entertainment. "I have to assume you had a reason for terrifying the life out of us with that?"

This drew a wry smile from the goblin. "I think it's fair to say that Hermione's safety is a very high priority for everyone sitting here, and is the reason for you watching my memory of that morning. Your daughter's safety was such a high priority, her bracelet has more protection runes than any piece of jewellery ever worn by a witch or

wizard. Our problem is, it shouldn't have been able to protect her like that - this has never happened before."

Emma was puzzled at this. "Harry's do it all the time, isn't this a good thing?"

"As a centurion, Harry's are specifically designed to do that. They are also bound to him by blood and will never come off. We are still trying to determine how his magic allows the armour to increase his speed and strength when Hermione gave us a whole new problem. Her bracelet expanding to become body armour is not a good thing, it's a great thing - but only if she can repeat it."

His daughter having the ability to suddenly be protected by armour was a bloody brilliant thing in Dan Granger's book too. "How do we go about achieving that?"

"We want to blood-bond the bracelet to Hermione and see if that works, the director has promised to consider using the centurion enchantments on it if need be. Tomorrow will thrust Harry even more into the spotlight, and we all know who will be right by his side. As a friend of the goblin nation, we intend to do everything in our power to offer Hermione protection."

Both parents immediately wanted to know what this blood-bond entailed, and any side effects.

"She merely has to prick a finger and rub her blood into the disks containing runes, then I need to perform some enchantments. The only downside for Hermione is that the bracelet will never leave her wrist after that."

Dan realised this would mean his daughter walking around for the rest of her life wearing Harry - Hermione - best friends forever on her wrist, he also realised that the world Hermione had entered could be a dangerous place. He considered the slim possibility that these two wouldn't remain best friends, leaving Hermione with this constant reminder of that fact, a small price to pay for the protection this would afford his daughter. He glanced toward Emma to see his wife already nodding her consent.

Barchoke returned his attention to the youngsters. "This is going to take some work, Hermione, but you'll have Harry to help. I also think

this should be kept a secret, and hope you never need it. If we keep it to the group who know about Harry being able to cast with his sword, that should allow you to practice without alerting anyone. You'll probably need to wait until you return to Hogwarts though, you have other friends with you for the rest of the holidays."

Hermione had a question that was worrying her. "That shield formed over my clothes, will it form under them if my bracelet is blood-bound?"

"This is so unusual that all I can do is offer my best guess, which would be yes."

This drew a blush from the young witch, Harry might not have a problem with displaying his chest, Hermione had no intention of letting that happen to her. At least not for a few years anyway, and then only when she and Harry were ready for that.

-oOoOo-

Despite Harry's repeated protests that it was Neville's special day, those protests were ignored - especially by Neville - and the party at Longbottom Manor was held for both birthday boys. Neville managed to turn Harry's opinion around half way through the evening when he confessed this was already his best birthday party ever. It was a group in very good spirits who were gathered in the ante-room at the ministry, waiting on tonight's events getting started. As the guests of honour, they would only enter the ballroom after everyone else was seated.

An aide then informed them that the minister had just taken his seat, it was time to go.

Arthur Weasley brought up the rear of the procession, with Molly on one arm and a wide-eyed Ginny on the other. Ginny was dressed in the finest robes she'd ever owned, yet still didn't fit-in. She was here though, which was more than any of her brothers had managed. She didn't really need to console herself, just being here tonight was magical. She was drawn out of her dreaming by a loud fanfare of trumpets.

"What's that daddy?"

"Oh, that will be Harry..."

"Oh wow! He can play the trumpet too?"

Molly's harrumph was ignored, just like her husband had ignored her opinion on tonight. With Bill no longer having to spend his weekends at Hogwarts, he had switched to spending that time in the Burrow. He was still teaching though, trying to prepare them for what they would face tonight. Three things very quickly became apparent to Molly - this was a really big night for the Weasley family, they were woefully under-prepared and they'd be leaving the biggest asset the family possessed sitting at home.

Arthur had ignored her advice to take Bill, instead plumping for giving his beloved daughter the best early birthday present he possibly could. Tonight could make or break them, the Weasley's were the ministry's representatives at this table. Instead of having an expert on goblins - Bill probably knew more about muggles than his father too! - they had an out of her depth, starstruck, soon to be eleven year old little girl.

Her husband obviously hoped this would be a foot in the door for Ginny, trying to avoid another situation like Ron at Hogwarts. Molly couldn't fault him for that but already knew this attempt was doomed to failure. These were very nice kids but they were talking about a party they attended last night, shopping in Rome and all were looking forward to going on holiday together soon after tonight's ball. What was Ginny supposed to talk about with them? The swimming hole is quite muddy but the apples needed the rain is hardly going to be riveting conversation.

After Ginny attends Hogwarts, they would all have some common ground to chat about but tonight was a mistake. Molly had begun to wonder if the goblins weren't a lot cleverer than they were being given credit for. It was assumed that Bill becoming Barchoke's assistant was to save the goblins making silly mistakes, Molly now though her son's real job would be to stop Arthur putting his foot in his mouth. If tonight backfired on them, Molly silently swore that Arthur would be sleeping in that bloody shed of his until at least Christmas.

Hermione was on Harry's arm as he led their procession into the ballroom, she sparkled at his side - literally. The goblin tailors had

recognised their work would be featured in the wizarding press all over Europe, so only their very best would do. They would be pleased to know the photographers were practically fighting with each other to capture images of their fine work.

They had chosen pastel colours as the basis for their designs, with Hermione's being pale green. The goblins had taken the designs handed to them and applied their own stamp though. Hermione's dress was high at the neck with the bodice delicately embroidered and deep green semi-precious stones reflecting any available light. All the other dresses had sashes around the waists - ending in bows at the back - but hers had a wide and bejewelled dark green belt, from which her sword hung in its sheath.

The dress was almost to the floor and the puffed shoulder sleeves were covered by an embroidered shawl that appeared to have gold thread running through the green material. Add in the jewellery from Barchoke and Hermione was a show-stopper. The goblin tailors had achieved that most difficult of tasks. Instead of attempting to dress young girls as women, their designs merely hinted at the beautiful women these young witches would one day become. Harry's waistcoat matched the shade of his date's dress perfectly, while his frock coat was dark green to match Hermione's accents. Of course, the young couple sported matching swords too.

Dan, Emma and Barchoke followed their children into the ballroom, Dan thought his wife was the most beautiful woman at the ball as her cream dress highlighted the tan this year's holiday had provided. Unlike the girls' dresses, Emma's was a more traditional look for this period. The bodice, while lower, was adorned with pearls and her dark brown shawl and sash matched the shade of Dan's frock coat perfectly.

That Emma was the most beautiful lady present was not a view shared by everyone, as they were followed by Sirius - and a simply stunning Henrica. Like each couple the goblins had designed clothes for, Sirius' dusky pink waistcoat matched his date's dress perfectly - and the dark maroon frock coat complimented those highlight colours. Sirius had Minerva on his other arm but all the attention was elsewhere. Photographers that had been almost fighting over Harry and Hermione nearly started a riot trying to get closer to Henrica.

Neville came next, with Padma on one arm and his gran on the other. As all the elder witches had done, Augusta had chosen to wear what she normally would to an occasion like this. She thought her grandson looked incredibly handsome in his chosen clothes though. They in turn were followed by the other three Patils. While Parvati was dressed in the same style as the other young witches in their party, Smita and Ramrao had chosen more traditional Indian wear.

Amelia was behind this riot of colour, though Susan and Hannah were almost as bright as they too shone in their goblin made dresses. The Weasleys brought up the rear as the special guests were escorted to their table.

There was a small band-stage in front of the guest of honour's table, and it was to this stage that the minister soon made his way. Harry's table was front and centre, with the nearest surrounding tables populated by ministry officials - and those willing to pay the asking price for getting close to the boy who lived. Cornelius cleared his throat before beginning his prepared speech.

"Good evening everyone, it gives me great pleasure to greet you all at this very special event. Our guest of honour made a couple of requests regarding tonight, requests I was delighted to comply with. First, young Harry asked if some of the formality could be removed from this evening, as it's his birthday - how could I say no?" This drew some laughter, cheering and a good few shouts of 'Happy Birthday'. Cornelius wasn't lying, he was just being a politician and stretching the truth. Harry had asked that he be awarded his medal as just that, Harry - hence losing the formalities.

"There was also a request made that we do the presentation before dinner, getting the speeches out the way and allowing everyone to enjoy their evening."

Yes, a request had been made, but the minister had no intention of saying the request came from him. With the presentation done, his hope was that the press would stay for the free food - perhaps the first dance - and then bugger off. Cornelius was well aware of the undercurrent of animosity that was presently flowing amongst some sections of their society. One glance at Harry's table was enough to know that here would be the lightning rod for those animosities, especially as the night progresses and the drink flowed. The minister



wanted the press long gone before any incidents presented themselves.

"It was Halloween nineteen eighty one when the dark lord visited Godric's Hollow, tonight is about this country acknowledging the debt that we owe the Potter family for their bravery and selfless sacrifice. The ministry wanted a way to express their gratitude and from this, the James and Lily Potter scholarships were born. A panel consisting of Madam Bones, Professor McGonagall and Harry's godfather, Lord Black were convened and tasked with administering this scholarship. In September, a young first generation wizard and a pureblood witch, who tragically lost her mother in an accident, will be the first recipients of this scholarship. Young Harry though is taking his involvement even further, he and his friends intend to meet these recipients in Diagon Alley and make sure their transition into Hogwarts students is as painless as it can possibly be."

This was met with loud applause, helping children through Hogwarts was not something that anyone could really publicly oppose.

"We are now at the portion of the evening that everyone is here for. Rather than me standing here and talking about the boy-who-lived, I think we would all rather see Harry receive his Order of Merlin, First Class - and then hear from him."

Harry rose with the applause and purposely walked toward the minister. He'd gone over this speech with his father and Hermione, and was as ready as he would ever be. While wizarding speeches appeared to be long and flowery, goblins tended to be more direct and leave less room for misinterpretation. 'Kill the bastard before he gut's you' might be appropriate but would hardly go down well tonight.

The minister pinned Harry's medal onto his coat as his table led the loud cheering that followed. He was then invited forward to say a few words and an expectant hush fell over the ballroom.

"I would like to thank the minister and his ministry for this prestigious award, I hope you will all forgive me if I say that the honour tonight's event is bestowing on my mum and dad means so much more to me. Yes they gave their lives fighting a great evil, as did a lot of witches and wizards who will have relatives and friends sitting here tonight. I

see this scholarship as something that honours all those who fell fighting the good fight, this is their honour too - their remembrance!"

The applause started slow, shocked and tearful faces were now reflected back at Harry. They had come tonight to see and hear a boy, instead they found themselves entranced by this charismatic young man. The applause quickly built, and, like a powerful wave, soon engulfed the ballroom. When it died down, Harry began the part of his prepared speech that he knew would be controversial.

"Yes, my mum and dad died fighting a great evil, but that great evil wasn't Voldemort." Harry used the shock of him saying that dreaded name out loud to remove a small glass vial from his waistcoat pocket. "No, Tom Riddle was nothing more than a powerful wizard who used existing prejudices to almost bring this country to its knees. I have here a vial of blood, can anyone tell me how pure it is?"

This was greeted by total silence, it felt as if someone had asked the queen if it was her that just let one rip. Not expecting an answer to his question, Harry continued. "My three best friends and I are a pretty strange mixture. A daughter of an ancient Indian pureblood line, the scion of one of Britain's oldest pureblood families, a first generation witch and then me - a wizard raised by goblins. Do you think this vial here tells you any of that? Prejudices in nineteen eighty one dictated my mother should be slaughtered like an animal because of her circumstances of birth, yet we are all here tonight honouring her."

Harry turned to face a minister who was turning paler by the second. "Minister Fudge's courageous stance on this matter should be applauded, and certainly has my full support. It takes a brave man to say this bigotry will no longer be tolerated in Britain, tonight's awards broadcasts that message out like a welcoming beacon to the rest of the world. As does his recent attempts for a closer relationship with the goblin nation." This had the colour returning to the minister, and it got even better as Harry's attention once more shifted to the audience.

"As you probably know, I've spent most of my life living as a goblin and I can honestly say I see a lot of similarities between our cultures. My father is a brave and honourable goblin, traits I know both cultures hold dear. He is also a head of family, a head who, just like every other head of family, hopes one day his eldest son will follow

in his footsteps. I really could never see myself becoming a banker, but an ambassador is certainly a position worth aspiring to."

Harry had made that as plain as he possibly could and it was now time to finish up. "A few days ago my friends and I were in Rome, we took the time to visit that city's ancient colosseum. I found it sad that the civilisation who built this magnificent structure were wiped out, simply because they couldn't adapt to the changing world around them. The sterling efforts and forward thinking of Minister Fudge's administration should ensure a fate like that will never befall this society, and see our country go from strength to strength. I would like to thank you all for these awards, listening to me and hope they're serving the food soon. I'm a growing lad and am really looking forward to dinner!"

Cornelius led the applause, and shook Harry's hand as the boy returned to his table where they were all on their feet. The boy-who-lived had just given him and his ministry an endorsement that no amount of gold could buy, he had also cleverly made that support conditional. Providing his ministry stayed in the light, he could count on Harry's support. Since this was the direction he wished to go, that shouldn't be a problem.

Cornelius almost shit himself when the boy took out that vial of blood, this was a subject one didn't talk about in polite company. He couldn't think of anyone else who could have pulled it off. All that was needed now was for his vote to pass the Wizengamot on Monday and Cornelius could relax, for a little while at least.

Harry returned to his table to a rapturous reception, and a congratulatory kiss from his girlfriend.

Molly had listened while Bill talked about this young man, but seeing him 'in action' so to speak had practically taken her breath away. He'd just stared down the pureblood elite of Britain, Europe too, and told them they had been wrong. This was no childish rant though, he stood there like a warrior and verbally tore their former leader to shreds - before finally outing their pureblood superiority beliefs for the nonsense that they are. She wondered how many of them would enjoy their meal after that, being reminded they were here to honour a muggle born witch and her 'goblin' son. Something was bothering her though, so when the table quietened Molly asked her question.

"Harry, I hope you don't mind me asking but you never actually said who that blood belonged to?" She felt the full force of those green eyes and that devilish smile, framed by his long, jet black hair. Molly suddenly realised this boy had the charm, charisma and confidence to pull off just about anything.

"That was precisely my point, Mrs Weasley, it didn't matter whose blood it was. Actually, it's not really blood at all. This is fake blood that I bought out of a joke shop in Crawley, it's supposedly edible and strawberry flavoured - if anyone wants to try it?"

Sirius, Dan and Ramrao suddenly had their respective wives and girlfriend pounding between their shoulder blades to alleviate their choking, a consequence of trying to burst into laughter while eating soup.

Not sure whether her hearing had suddenly malfunctioned, Molly asked for confirmation. "You faced down this entire crowd using something you bought out of a joke shop?"

Harry's smile went up another notch in answer as Arthur suddenly had a horrible premonition of what his new job could entail. "Bill tells us you are friends with Fred and George?"

"Oh yes sir, they're great guys - especially after we came to an understanding that meant no more pranks on us."

Of course, that was a story the entire table wanted to hear. It left Molly certain she was right, they had really underestimated the goblins. Arthur thought his wife was correct too, he wasn't anywhere near prepared for this job.

Dolores hadn't been prepared for that speech, at least she wasn't alone in that, it certainly ruined her appetite. She'd been working quietly behind the scenes for the last few weeks, trying to ensure this disgusting goblin proposal was kicked out on Monday. That speech from the boy-who-lived just destroyed all her endeavours. That wasn't the real reason she was currently stirring her soup, rather than eating it. Glancing over at the top table destroyed any appetite she had.

How were you meant to enjoy your food with mudbloods, muggles and even creatures sitting in the heart of the ministry. Why didn't

they just invite a centaur along too and be done with it? She was sure the caterers would have arranged for a bale of hay, save the curtains and upholstery from getting chewed. A house elf could have been ordered to follow the beast around with a shovel, centaur shit on the ballroom floor would really have made everyone's evening!

It was time for Dolores to stop her musing and face facts. Unless something was done here tonight that would show this boy for the child that he was, the goblin proposal would sail through the Wizengamot on Monday. It was also looking increasingly likely that she would have to be the one to do it too. Now all Dolores needed to figure out was just exactly what 'it' could be?

A/N Thanks for reading

A/N 2 Running a bit late this week, though this is the longest chapter of HC to date. I've also been very busy with a project, a project I could use your help with. I've been working with some 13/14 y.o. kids to produce a film against knife crime in Scotland. This is a national competition, run by the Scottish government, and we've reached the semi-final stage. Around the beginning of February, the competing videos will go online and people will be invited to electronically vote for their favourite - sussed where I could use your help yet? Will post more details when they come into the school.

## Chapter 34

Albus was taking an evening stroll around the castle, this was at least better than sitting in his office moping. He'd been so busy thinking about the public embarrassment missing tonight's ball would cause him that he'd totally overlooked the much greater problem that was right under his nose. Albus had also been mulling over what to do about Severus when it hit home that he hadn't actually seen his potions professor for a while.

During the summer break, it wasn't uncommon for staff to be missing for weeks at a time but Severus would usually tell him when he set off on an ingredients gathering trip. As Albus cast his mind back further, the last time he could recall seeing the head of Slytherin was when Severus saw his students off to the express. This led Albus to do something he would not normally do, enter a professor's accommodation without their permission or knowledge. In Severus' rooms he found no sign of his potions professor, literally. It was evident Severus had packed everything he owned and skedaddled out the castle - no fond goodbye or even a note.

This left Albus in a precarious position. If he told Barchoke that it was Snape who passed on the prophecy, it would now appear as if he'd helped Severus flee before revealing the informant's identity. The headmaster was also in a quandary over what to do about a potions professor come September. Severus hadn't handed in his notice, and advertising his position might alert people that he'd done a runner. Just when Albus thought he'd finally got the defence job sorted, along comes something else to upset the apple cart. He was left asking himself why the fates suddenly hated him so?

-oOoOo-

Dolores thought the fates were against her as well. She would admit to herself that thinking on her feet was not one of her best traits, she was more of a careful schemer who strived from the shadows to achieve her long term goals - but that wouldn't work tonight. She had approached a few people who shared some of her opinions on magical society, hoping to create a collective sense of outrage at this odious circus tonight's ball was turning into. Really, she was just looking for someone to do the dirty work in her place but Dolores was finding no takers.

The boy cunningly revealing he might one day be the goblin ambassador had won him a lot of plaudits tonight, that the ministry wouldn't then have to deal with a beast was certainly a plus. If the boy decided to forsake them and live as a goblin, the public would tear down whatever government allowed that travesty to happen. Here might be a compromise that was acceptable to all.

There was also those who weren't present tonight but whose absence still played a big part in Dolores not finding the support she was looking for. That Albus Dumbledore was refused an invitation for the ball again counted in the boy's favour, especially amongst those with the same leanings as Dolores. At the back of all their minds too was the omission of the Malfoys, now social pariahs in their community. The fact that their wealth was locked away until the son came of age sent shivers up pureblood spines - and this boy was rumoured to be the one responsible for their spectacular fall from grace.

No, it would appear Dolores was on her own tonight. Gordon had told her that when he tried to instigate a confrontation with the boy at Hogwarts, this supposed hero had point-blank refused. This led Dolores to believe his extra defence training was because the boy-who-lived needed it. All she had seen from the boy so far was cutting Dumbledore's wand with a sword, after Black had punched the old fool out and put him on his back. Dolores was confident of winning any confrontation with the brat, it would be the engineering of it that would take all of her skill.

A direct attack on the boy would see her lose support, even after she trounced him. Dolores needed to choose her victim carefully, one that would have him rushing to their aid. All his friends were out for the same reason as the brat was, publicly, she couldn't appear to be a bully that was picking on children. This left Dolores running her eye over the rest of his company. Part of her would really like a go at that veela creature, but a mature veela wouldn't need a little boy springing to her aid. It was also known they could transform and throw fireballs at their foes, not something she fancied facing.

The more she studied, the more her choice became obvious - the muggle bitch who thought she and her mudblood daughter had the right to be here tonight. The problem with her choice was that Amelia Bones and Augusta Longbottom never let her intended

target get out of their sight. Dolores was getting desperate, but not desperate enough to tangle with either of those two witches.

Emma couldn't hide her delight at dancing with her daughter's boyfriend. "Oh thank you, Harry, if Arthur had asked me one more stupid question - I swear I would have screamed. If that's the ministry's expert on the general British public, Mr. 'I collect plugs - and batteries too' Weasley, then I hate to think how poor his knowledge is on your nation. Eckeltricity! - even Augusta knows better than that now. Molly's been staring daggers at her husband all evening but I think the chance to talk with two live muggles is too big of an opportunity for him to pass up."

"Well, it also get's me away from their daughter staring in my direction all through the meal. The break from Hogwarts must have lowered Hermione's tolerance, she usually can just ignore it."

She knew she really shouldn't tease but Emma couldn't help it, the mother in her had grown very fond of Harry. "I noticed the only time she wasn't staring at you was when you looked anywhere near her, then her face was redder than her hair. Do the girls stare often, Harry?"

"They stare at the boy-who-lived, not me. My friends don't stare because they've taken the time to get to know me, not some myth."

Emma had spotted some girls in Florida who'd never heard of Harry Potter but still eyed-up this handsome young man. Harry's shoulders were so broad and muscled that they'd had to purchase T-shirts supposedly for ages fifteen to sixteen to achieve a proper fit. With shorts and trainers completing his outfit, you would never have placed him as just approaching twelve. Emma felt those muscles tense as they danced before they sprang into action. She would not have considered herself light as such, that didn't account for Harry being able to lift her effortlessly off her feet and spin her around. No sooner had Emma's feet regained contact with terra firma when Harry had released his hold and quickly turned to face where she had been mere seconds before.

Dolores had sensed a golden opportunity when her two intended victims took to the dance floor. Her original intention was to stick out her foot and trip the bitch before instigating an argument, that was before the green eyed monster of jealousy saw the angry red mist



descend to cloud her judgement. This woman was beautiful, even Dolores couldn't deny that. The muggle moved with a grace and elegance that she herself coveted, but it was the way she smiled and chatted to the boy in her arms that saw Delores' bile rise. She was suddenly transferred to other times and different places where the rules were always the same - the pretty girls got all the boys. That this bitch was a muggle magnified the problem immensely in Dolores' eyes.

As they danced toward her, an intended trip was rapidly transforming into a kick. By the time they reached where she had positioned herself, uncontrollable jealousy had Dolores wanting to harm this bitch for all the humiliation and hurt she'd suffered from pretty girls over the years. She took a step forward and swung her foot as hard as she could at those delicate ankles.

Dolores was prepared for the impact, what she wasn't prepared for was hitting fresh air - how could she have missed? Her striking foot continuing unchecked threw her totally off balance, and saw her rump hit the floor with a tremendous thump.

While sitting there trying to comprehend what had just happened, a hand reached out to help her. She looked along that arm until her gaze locked onto the greenest pair of eyes she'd ever seen.

"Are you okay? That bit of floor is slippy, it almost had Emma down just then."

They had instantly gathered a crowd, a crowd that was far from silent. "Slippy my arse, she tried to kick that lady..."

Dolores saw it reflected back in those green orbs, he not only knew what she'd attempted but had somehow foiled her attack. The muggle bitch looking over his shoulder added fuel to her now raging temper, this was not who the most famous wizard in their society should associate with. As far as Dolores was concerned, he'd already made his choice - and chosen badly.

"Get your paw away from me, goblin. You dishonour the proud name of Potter with the choices you make and the company you keep. Your parents would be ashamed of you."

The band may have been still playing a waltz but this was now the event attracting all the attention. Harry glanced at his still offered hand before replying. "That is something none of us here will ever know, since people who shared the same opinions as you saw them murdered in their home. I think what would make them ashamed is that they gave their lives yet this attitude still remains." His offered hand was withdrawn and Harry's gaze got harder. "I have been awarded your societies top honour tonight, but you still consider me far beneath you - purely down to you thinking what flows through your veins is better than mine. Would you care to duel and see if you're correct? I'm sure we can find another vial somewhere and then people can guess just how pure your blood is."

Before anyone could intervene and put a stop to this, Dolores quickly shouted her agreement. "I accept your duel to first blood, we'll see just whose blood it is that gets spilt."

Harry agreed, and then turned to find all his guests were now right behind him. He could see Sirius wanted to object but his father pushed forward first. "I'll hold your coat, son."

This effectively killed any argument though Hermione was now in front of him too, she began unbuttoning his waistcoat before giving advice most of the listening crowd could certainly hear. "Remember Master Sharpshard, don't mess about. Take her out quickly, I want more dances with my boyfriend tonight."

The waistcoat was now off and in his father's hands as his girlfriend started on his shirt. Padma had seen how the crowd reacted to Hermione's words and decided to take it a step further. "I thought Harry took Master Sharpshard out pretty effectively, Hermione. Greatest bladesmith the Goblin Nation has and Harry cut him to pieces, what your boyfriend can do with that sword is just scary..."

Dolores had of course been listening and interrupted. "I choose wands for this duel, not swords."

Hermione had removed his cravat and cuff links, leaving Harry standing there with his shirt open to the waist. He turned to face his opponent. "You are welcome to chose whatever weapons you want, as am I. If you wish to apologise for your attempted attack on Emma, and the slandering off my family, I will accept and we can move on."

Otherwise, you will face my blades. You challenged a centurion to a duel, you are about to find out just what that means."

Hermione removed one of the bejewelled disks that decorated her belt, one twist and Harry had a shield on his arm. "I've got a spare here if you need a second?"

This earned her a kiss from her boyfriend as Fudge then attempted to sweep the whole thing under the carpet. "Harry, is this really necessary? Can't we reach some agreement to avoid bloodshed? A sword against a wand is hardly a fair fight, I don't wish to see you hurt."

This saw his three friends burst out laughing, Neville further amazed his grandmother by standing up to the Minister of Magic. "Barchoke arranged duelling dummies for us to practice on. These are top of the range models but we can't let Harry fight them, two of them together can't hit Harry with a spell before he hacks them to pieces. Professor Weasley couldn't repair the last two he destroyed. I would guess she will get one, perhaps two spells off before Harry's blades find their mark. I don't know what she does at the ministry, but I would guess she won't be at work on Monday."

Harry had a shield and his knife on one arm while he drew his sword, taking a few practice swipes. "I've given my terms, minister. She came looking for a fight, I would hate to disappoint. The Grangers are under my protection yet she still made the attempt. Even then, I was prepared to overlook that since it was so childish an attempt - not now."

Glad his boots were made of dragon hide and would cope with the change, Harry activated his armour.

Hermione may have been terrified inside but none of that showed as she gave Harry a quick kiss for luck. "Make it quick, Harry, don't give her a chance to get a lucky shot in."

Dolores was rapidly reevaluating her options, they didn't look good. To back down now would be the end of her career, but to fight might be the end of a lot more than that. She enjoyed her position in the ministry, she also enjoyed picking her nose on occasion. If that blade got too close, Dolores might lose both her job and her wand arm.

She tried to stall, Dolores was ready to try anything. "Armour, what kind of honour is there in fighting with armour on?"

"The same type of honour there is in challenging a twelve year old boy to a duel on his birthday. You thought you would be fighting a little kid, instead you're facing a highly-trained centurion. Do we need a referee or are there too many witnesses for you to attack me when my back is turned?"

The band had long since stopped playing, unable to compete with the entertainment this confrontation was providing. Harry's comments drew loud gasps from the large crowd, most of whom were amazed at just how well this young man had judged his opponent.

Dolores was backed into a corner and couldn't see anyway out, she drew her wand and fired the first curse. Her emotional state being what it was, she cast the curse a lot stronger than she'd intended. It sliced the back of her hand open and she held it up to her opponent, almost wetting herself to find him now right in front of her with that deadly sword poised to strike - how could anyone move that fast?

"First blood I believe, is your honour satisfied?" Dolores was feeling quite pleased with her solution and put as much venom into the word 'honour' as she possibly could. The back of her hand was also in agony, she hoped it didn't leave a scar.

Her opponent then showed what he thought of her honour by turning his back on her and walking away. This was about as big a show of disrespect to an opponent's honour as possible, without committing the ultimate social faux pas and actually spitting in someone's face. Dolores dearly wanted to raise her wand but she now had a face full of furious Fudge.

"You will leave here immediately, reporting to my office at eight o'clock, Monday morning. At that time, you will be reassigned. If you're not there at eight sharp, I will assume you do not wish to be reassigned and have resigned from the ministry."

Dolores left the ball with her head down and leaving a trail of blood behind. Her hand hurt like the devil, it would probably leave a scar too! She was about to be demoted and some toady would take her

place on the fast track to success. Dolores knew she was finished in any administration headed by Fudge, what she needed to do now was keep her head down and give people time to forget tonight. Meanwhile, she would be looking about for a challenger to Fudge, and getting in quick before anyone else.

This was certainly going to be a long term project. As long as Fudge had the support of the boy-who-lived, he would be untouchable as minister. Dolores wasn't forgetting that brat either, he'd just shot straight to the top of her 'get even with' list. This was a very short list since she usually ensured those names that appeared on it soon got what was coming to them. She would have to play this one different, plotting the death or dismemberment of a national hero was not something that was going to happen overnight. She'd acted in haste tonight and paid the price, Fudge demoting her would see his proposal sail through the Wizengamot, Dolores would get even though - she always did.

Harry had buttoned his shirt, leaving it open at the neck, and slipped his waistcoat on. After that fiasco, the rest of the night would be informal as far as he was concerned. Hermione was right beside him and he could see her beginning to fret, both could benefit from a long hug but neither wanted to show weakness here.

"Harry, your dance card just filled with my name for the rest of the night."

"That's fine with me, Hermione, but I need to finish my dance with the beautiful lady who was my partner before this started."

Emma attempted to intervene. "Harry, it's fine..."

"No, mum, Professor Weasley taught us that your reactions after a fight can be just as important. We are all going to continue as if everything is normal, and enjoy the rest of the evening. One dance, Harry, then your mine."

Emma could actually feel him shaking as they danced. "Harry, wouldn't you rather sit for a while?"

"Actually, I'd rather get the hell out of here, but we can't leave yet. It's just the adrenalin, Emma, I was psyching myself up to attack that woman. I would need to have shown I wasn't a pushover and

actually harmed her, not something I was looking forward to. Her doing that actually worked better for me, I don't want to give the impression I'm some bloodthirsty nutter with a sword."

"I don't think you could ever be accused of being like that..."

"Dumbledore thought so after the troll, and some of the people here would too if I'd just sliced that witch's wand arm off. After the troll, I stood in a shower for about an hour before hiding in my room for the rest of the night. After Malfoy, I was in a toilet throwing up when Hermione found me. With Master Sharpshard, I was too concerned for Hermione to let anything else bother me."

This drew a shiver from his dance partner. "Don't remind me, watching the memory was bad enough. You've had a hard life for a twelve year old."

"Oh no, Emma, I've had a great life. My father is a very wise goblin, he wanted me to see the world and I've loved every bit of it. The summer holidays have been the best time I've ever had. You now have some idea how wealthy my family is, I could easily spend the rest of my life living in my own private and privileged world. I think that is something my mum and dad would be disappointed in, I know my father wouldn't stop me but I just couldn't do that. All three have put their lives on the line to save mine, I think I need to at least try and make something of myself."

"Harry, you've already done more than enough to make all three of them proud of their son. I watched your father's memory of when you fought your trainer after he hurt Hermione, then tonight you stepped in to protect me too - how could anyone not be proud of you?"

"Does this mean you would accept a lodger for the rest of this weekend?"

"Well, since we'll all be going to your private island after the Wizangamot meeting on Monday, I would say that was a distinct possibility." She could feel his shakes lessening as they danced, both were simply ignoring the stares of the other dancers. Emma decided to make something clear. "Harry, that room at our house is now considered yours. Providing your father agrees, you can stay whenever you want. Dan and I certainly don't mind, and I doubt

Hermione will complain." She was rewarded by his first genuine smile since the incident.

The dance ended and Hermione was waiting for them, the young couple took to the floor and were soon oblivious to everything and everyone around them.

Ginny had watched the entire incident from behind her mother. Bill had told her Harry was very close to his three friends but this just drove that home, they were all there for him without a moment's hesitation. Ginny was trying to tell herself this was just a hopeless crush but Merlin, Harry was so handsome. She'd almost put her elbow in the soup simply eating at the same table as him, watching him dance with the girls at the table had built a hope in her she too might actually dance with Harry on his birthday. That was gone now, and probably just as well. Had he actually held her, Ginny Weasley would probably have fainted on the spot.

Emma returned to the table and was determined to take control of the conversation this time. "Molly, Arthur, I can't praise your son, Bill, highly enough. We've actually seen him teaching and were very impressed. He's certainly had a wonderful effect on those four, they all really look up to him."

Molly's entire face lit up and Emma knew she'd hit the bullseye. Muggle or magical, mothers loved to talk about their children. She would much rather talk about that than have Arthur ask her what you used a rubber duck for.

-oOoOo-

Dolores considered herself lucky in a way. The press had gone positively ga-ga over Crow and his friends, with barely any mention of their altercation that happened later. Working under Ludo Bagman in the Department of Magical Games and Sports was also slightly better than the punishment she thought Fudge would stick her with. She had envisaged manning the graveyard shift in floor control for the next few years, or even exiled to rot in magical creatures.

This was not the deepest, darkest depths of the ministry Dolores thought she was destined for, a comeback was certainly possible from here. Now all she needed to do was light a fire under Ludo's

arse to raise the department's profile, though making sure she got most of the credit for any achievements they managed. It was still the same game and Dolores Umbridge was an expert at it.

-oOoOo-

Harry and Hermione were running along the beach, purely from habit their swords were strapped behind them. They'd arrived on the island after the minister's goblin proposal had surfed through the Wizengamot on the wave of positive energy still abounding from Friday's ball. There would be a ceremonial signing of the amended treaty at the end of August with Barchoke taking up his new position then. Dolores Umbridge didn't exactly have many friends so her demotion wasn't even commented on.

The island was just under five miles around, though it appeared as a group of sandbars on maps - and to the naked eye if you didn't have permission to be here. As their sandals performed a steady slap, slap, slap rhythm on the damp sand, Hermione thought this was her favourite time of the day. Not because of any love of exercise, though she had come to like that part too, this was the time in every day when it was just her and Harry. They had been exercising practically every morning since just after the troll incident last year.

Whether it was running around Crawley, the tunnels under Gringotts or the park outside Grimmauld Place, Hermione thought this had them all beat. She wondered if Harry could get the room at Hogwarts to recreate this? Now, wouldn't that be something to get her out of a warm bed on a cold winter's morning in the castle? This made her smile, knowing that the mere thought that the young man currently running beside her would be waiting downstairs was all the motivation Hermione Granger would ever need.

It probably appeared strange to outsiders how much she depended upon Harry, how much they relied on each other, to them it just felt so natural. She entered Kings Cross station without a friend in the world, and left the express knowing she'd just made the best one either would ever find. Some might also question how quiet Harry could be, but not anyone who really knew him. Before she left for Hogwarts, her mother had given her the 'boy talk' but none of that applied to Harry.



Yes he certainly struggled sometimes putting his feelings into words, she was sure though that was more to do with being raised as a goblin than any question of immaturity. Harry didn't need words with her, every time he hugged her or when Hermione looked into those green eyes - those actions spoke volumes to her.

That they'd fallen asleep in each other's arms after the ball was somewhat expected, waking up still there and covered with a quilt showed the enormous trust both sets of parents placed on them - something neither had any intention of breaking. Just being with Harry meant this would have easily have been the best summer of her life. That they had seen and done some amazing things together was just the cherry on top.

They could see the beach chalets up ahead, meaning they were near the end of their run. Hermione reached out and took Harry's arm as both of them then slowed to a walk.

"I've been practicing with my bracelet since your father blood-bonded it to me..."

This drew a wide smile from her boyfriend. "None of us actually thought you would wait until we were back at Hogwarts, how is the practice going?"

Trying not to blush at how well he knew her, Hermione thought a demonstration would be the best way to show Harry. Her bracelet expanded up her arm and wrapped around her shoulder, slipping partially under the sports bra she was wearing.

"Hermione, that's fantastic! When you fight with a sword, your shield arm is the most exposed. If we can get that shield expanded over your torso, you will be almost as protected as me."

Harry praise, followed by taking her in his arms and offering a kiss in reward for her efforts meant Hermione's morning was just perfect. They walked arm in arm the last quarter of a mile to where they were staying.

There were eight chalets / beach huts spaced along the white sands. They may have appeared rustic and basic from the outside but stepping onto the porch brought you every comfort magic had to offer.

The twins were sitting on one of those porches, eating breakfast and watching the young couple approach. Parvati's eyeballs nearly joined the cereal in her bowl at the sight of Harry in just a pair of shorts. "Oh Merlin, how does Hermione resist throwing Harry to the sand and snogging him senseless?"

Padma just couldn't help but tease her sister. "Who says she does resist? This is a big island, they're hardly likely to do it outside their parents' porches."

Seeing she was falling for this, Padma changed tactics. There couldn't be the slightest hint of misunderstanding here. "Seriously Pav, it's okay to look - just don't ogle and never, ever think of touching. Those two are great friends but anyone trying to come between them will get squashed like a bug. You were brilliant in Rome, but here it will only be us. We'll swim, play games and generally have a great time. Both Harry and Neville will spend most of the week like that, just be their friend and get used to it. We thought the boys were going to have a heart attack the first time they saw us in our bikinis, they got over it pretty quickly."

"You mean the boys have seen you in that thing you showed me?"

"No, we took them off and swam naked..."

"YOU DID WHAT?"

"Daaad! I was only kidding with Pav. Emma and Augusta were there all the time, do you really think those two would let anything happen?"

Ramrao had walked out and just caught the end of that conversation. "Sorry dear, you just scared your old father half to death. I trust the people you were staying with, the young men involved and more importantly, I trust you."

This saw Padma rush to hug her dad. "I was very proud of you at that ball, the way you helped Harry. He really didn't want to fight that woman..." Ramrao really shouldn't have been surprised at his daughter once more springing to the young man's defence.

"Of course Harry didn't want to fight her, only a fool would want to fight. We're taught fighting should be your last option. We are also taught how to fight, just in case we need that option. Harry would have made mincemeat of her, dad, I wasn't joking when I said he was scary with that blade. Neville called it right, she would have gotten one, perhaps two spells off and then it would have been all over. It would also have been all over the Prophet too, and certainly hurt the chances of the goblin proposal going through the Wizengamot."

He kissed the top of his daughter's head. "So smart and so brave..." Ramrao then pantomimed looking around him at the idilic setting. "...and I just love your friends!"

Parvati felt a twinge of jealousy at the attention her twin sister was receiving, attention that would usually be heading in her direction. It was also strange seeing Padma with the cool friends and the hot date for the ball. Just thinking of the number of witches who would kill to be in her place soon had the smile back on Parvati's face, it would probably take her until Christmas to tell Lavender all that had happened so far - and they still had Tokyo to look forward to.

Remus was also watching the young couple approach, the lump of emotion in his throat affecting his voice as he shouted to them. "Still up for a lesson, you two?"

He couldn't get over just how much Harry reminded him of James, the mature version who finally got Lily Evans' attention in the way he wanted. Hermione might look nothing like his friend Lily but, if Remus closed his eyes, it was almost like talking to Lily again as they did their prefect patrols. He'd led a pretty isolated life for the last decade and was struggling to cope with being in company where he was not only accepted but made welcome.

Harry waved over at the man who was a friend of his parents, and his godfather's best friend too. They'd gotten to know Remus from staying in Grimmauld Place, gradually building trust and growing to like the person who must have been the quiet one amongst the marauders.

"We normally have a practice after our morning run so now works for us - if that's all right for you?"

Remus quickly agreed and by the time he joined them, their swords were laid down as they ran through some shield drills. These two had effected a variation that Remus had never seen before. They would occasionally let a spell through, only to reflect it back at the caster using the metal shields on their forearms.

Neville and Padma joined them and were soon practicing shield drills of their own. The four friends had quickly drawn a crowd with everyone currently on the island coming out to watch. Barchoke removed some portable ward stones from a bag, creating a shielded area around the four who were practicing.

Remus' intentions were for them to carry out their normal practice so he could asses what level they were at, they were clearly a lot more advanced than a normal first year Hogwarts curriculum would provide. When they finished practicing, they switched to duels with the three going after Harry. It soon became obvious that the ward stones were needed to protect the spectators as curses were flying everywhere as they deflected off shields - magical and physical.

The trio were working well together, trying to outflank Harry while keeping him busy defending himself from very accurately cast curses. Harry though had a trick up his sleeve and created a powerful blast of air. Normally this would be worse than useless, normally they didn't fight on a beach. Neville and Padma were soon out the fight, sand in their eyes left them sitting ducks to be picked off. Hermione had used her metal shield to protect her eyes but now knew she was outmatched. With Padma and Neville blinded from the sand, even reviving them wouldn't help. She was still figuring out what to do when her boyfriend clipped her with a stunner.

She came back round, hearing Padma's voice. "Have I told you I hate you today, Harry? If not, consider it done - that sand went bloody everywhere!"

Neville's answer to that problem was to strip off his shirt and dive into the sea, creating another problem as three young witches were left practically drooling at the two boys on display.

Harry was helping a groaning Hermione into a sitting position. "You did well..."

"I did not! That was a brilliant use of our environment as a weapon, I'm still taking too long to make my mind up about what I'm going to do. In a real fight, I won't have five minutes to think over what action to take."

"Don't be too hard on yourself - HERMIONE!"

The last word was shouted in shock as a wave leapt from the sea and soaked both of them. He'd been concentrating on cheering up Hermione and missed what her wand was doing. They were soon rolling in the sand, soaking wet and roaring with laughter.

Both marauders were also wearing wide grins at the prank but the morning entertainment wasn't over just yet. Barchoke removed two duelling dummies from his bag and brought them to full size.

"I know some of you were very worried at the ball the other night, you may have noticed neither I nor his three duelling partners had any concerns on the matter. This was not bravado, we just know Harry's abilities. He would need to have done something really stupid to be in any danger, and Hermione had him focused totally on the task in hand. I'm hoping we could have a little demonstration here this morning, Harry?"

He pulled Hermione to her feet, getting a kiss for luck before going over to collect his sword. With this amount of people here, he wasn't going to be able to cast with his sword but Harry should still be able to manage.

Even with this handicap, a golden Harry had destroyed both dummies in under ten seconds.

Amelia had probably more experience with fighting than anyone there, her knees went weak at what she'd just witnessed - she sat on the beach before her legs actually gave way.

Ramrao was reminded of Padma's words earlier and found himself in complete agreement with his daughter. Harry would have made mincemeat out of that witch.

Dan and Emma had watched the memory of a very real fight against that giant goblin, Harry hacking a couple of dummies just couldn't compare to that. They now had a better idea of what Harry could

have done to that witch the other night, no wonder the kids were really upset when they eventually came home.

Remus was standing beside Sirius, Henrica and Barchoke, and wasn't slow to let his opinion be known. "Whoever you've got teaching these four defence, keep a hold of them. That was simply brilliant, and devastating. Amelia's sitting there trying to figure out how you would defend yourself from such an attack, I doubt she's having any better ideas than me - and all I've got is get the hell out of there as fast as possible."

All could see the pride of a father in his son. "That is an attack Harry has developed by combining Curse-breaker Weasley's teachings with that of his goblin weapons training and centurion armour. If it makes you feel any better, we goblins don't know how we would stand up to that either. He used something similar to defeat someone we all thought couldn't be beaten. If any goblin is ever stupid enough to challenge my son in the goblin arena, they probably wouldn't have time to shit themselves before Harry cut them down."

Henrica was nodding in agreement. "I've been worried about that since reading through your laws especially the inheritance ones. Harry could be challenged, and now he's a centurion you wouldn't be able to represent him in the pit."

"It has been a worry of mine for a few years, how Harry would cope if I couldn't represent him, I'm not worried any more. I don't want to say too much here but Harry was actually holding back there."

Remus glanced toward Sirius for confirmation of that ridiculous remark, only to get a nod that left him with only a one word answer. "Shit!"

Augusta had been concentrating on something else this morning, watching as her grandson threw magic around with accuracy and ease. She also hadn't missed the reaction of the three young witches when Neville stripped off his shirt. For the first time in many years, Augusta saw a bright future for the house of Longbottom.

She was in a very happy frame of mind when Barchoke approached her, removing a book with a plain brown cover. "This will give you something to read while our charges tire themselves out having fun

on the beach. It's a pre-print copy of a book that won't be available until the first of September, all I ask is that you keep it quiet until then. I have a copy for Amelia too, so you can talk to her about it - and I will answer any questions either of you have."

As the little goblin walked toward Amelia, it was an intrigued Augusta who opened the book - only to find herself involuntary sitting down onto the sand as the title hit home. The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore.

-oOoOo-

Harry raced into his room, a shower, change of shorts and then breakfast with Hermione the only things on his mind. He didn't know he had a visitor, and one who appeared really excited to see him.

"Harry Potter!" said the creature in a high-pitched voice. "So long has Dobby wanted to meet you, sir ... Such an honour it is. ..."

A/N thanks for reading

A/N 2 a big thank you to everyone who gave such a positive response about the project I'm working on, I only hope your expectations aren't too high. Please remember this is a 2 minute film, made by kids to encourage other kids not to do something foolish. Our school sits in deepest, darkest Lanarkshire - Pixar we ain't. Details will follow around the beginning of February.

## Chapter 35

"... Harry Potter must not go back to Hogwarts."

Dan had been taking mental notes as he'd been listening and rhymed off a few questions that Harry's story had thrown up. "Okay, why would he call you Harry Potter? Travelling halfway around the world to give a warning makes no sense either, if he then pops away and doesn't tell you what you're being warned against? I'll probably have more but that should do to get us started."

Harry was eating his breakfast as he had told those around the table of his encounter. "All house elves call me Harry Potter. They just see me as a wizard and I can't hide my family ring from them..."

He was interrupted by Remus almost choking on his coffee, the tears in his eyes this time weren't emotionally driven as he stared at Harry. "You're head of House Potter? I thought Sirius was the one who arranged all this?"

It was actually Sirius who answered. "It's okay, people, I'll vouch for Remus. Moony, there are things going on that I can't tell you about, just know that it's in relation to my duties as a godfather. Everyone sitting at this table wants what's best for Harry, I know you do too."

Looking around at those present, Remus had to agree with that assessment. Barchoke, the Grangers and Sirius were all self-evident, Henrica provided her own reason.

"He's my boss, Remus, and a nicer, kinder employer you could never hope to find."

Henrica's pout in Harry's direction would have had grown wizards on their knees proposing marriage, he just continued eating breakfast before making a comment that brought the levity back to the table. "Still not getting a raise!"

Barchoke was delighted to see how well his son was dealing with news of this proposed threat. They had expected some backlash from the darker families, here was an indication of their plotting. "Distance would be no problem to a house elf, the fact it was obviously going against its master's wishes gives us some indication of the seriousness of the problem."



Harry spotted Hermione putting her knife and fork down in disgust and reached for her hand, her boyfriend was certain he knew what was bothering her. "Hermione, we talked about this, it's all about perception."

"Can you honestly say that poor creature was not a slave? He was going to shut his own ears in an oven door because he'd disobeyed his master and warned you - we both know this is wrong, Harry."

This was an issue they had talked about and obviously not resolved as well as Harry had thought. "You know my opinion on slaves, it's every bit as strong as yours. Goblins would rather die than be enslaved, and it's something we would never inflict on anyone else. Yes House Potter has house elves but I refuse to consider them slaves."

Harry squeezed her hand to prevent the interruption he knew was coming. "Potter elves have been part of my family for generations. You've met some of them, would you say they were happy?"

She was left with no other answer than to agree. "Most were so happy to see us, they were in tears."

Remembering something he had read, Harry tried a different tactic with his girlfriend. "Supposing your mum and dad decided Crawley wasn't for them any more. Both then joined a charity that saw them treating people for free, would that make them slaves?"

"That's not the same, Harry, mum and dad could leave whenever they wanted..."

"I told my elves the same, and the tears this time were certainly not happy ones. They are doing a job they love and having all their needs taken care of, they neither want nor need wages - freedom to them means rejection, shame and exile from their family. They look after us and we look after them, everybody's happy - that's the way it's supposed to work, Hermione. I do agree that there will be wizards who will abuse the system but I can't do anything about that - yet. You've seen the fight we've had just to kick goblin relations up a notch, recognition that house elves have rights too will be a much harder fight. It's a challenge I'm willing to fight, but now is not the time. Are you okay with this? Are we good?"

Those last three words cut right through any objection Hermione had left, she needed Harry to believe her on this. "Of course we're good, Harry, and I'm sorry if you thought for even one second we might not be. I know you would never mistreat elves, just as I know you will be trying to help this Dobby. I wasn't angry at you, just a system that allows a person to legally mistreat someone who's in their care."

Along with relief, Harry felt a hand on his shoulder. As well as that gesture of support, Dan had some kind words to match. "Just keep talking things out, you two, you won't go far wrong doing that. Now, what do we do about this warning?"

Harry looked toward his father, getting a nod of agreement before continuing. He thought his father would leave the decision up to him, it didn't hurt to check though. "If Hogwarts is going to be in danger, she'll need her champion. I have friends in that castle and two new Potter scholarship students will be looking to me for help with settling in. Unless we get more information, it will be a case of keeping our eyes open. Henrica will be there full-time, with Sirius, Curse-breaker Weasley and Master Pitslay paying regular visits. We tell Neville and Padma what we know but any more could see rumours starting, rumours that would grow arms, legs and a dozen fire-breathing heads before they were done."

Hermione was now very worried, she looked at both her parents. "I want to return with Harry. We'll have adult support and a method to get out of there if anything happens."

Her parents held a conversation with a few glances before Dan spoke. "At the moment, all we've got is some vague warning from a creature whose mental stability is at best questionable. We reserve the right to change our mind if more information becomes available, and will drag you from that school if we suspect you're not telling us everything..."

Barchoke interrupted before Dan could say any more. "It would actually be me who would be doing the dragging, something I can assure you I would do if I thought they were in danger. I have constant reports from the castle, we won't be missing anything."

Hermione was so pleased she was going back to Hogwarts with Harry, she would actually have agreed to just about anything.

-oOoOo-

That evening, the seven youngsters sat around a camp fire on the beach. They'd spent their day swimming, playing games and exploring the island. All were knackered yet far too excited to sleep. Stories of Florida, the Black Sea and Rome weren't helping to lower those excitement levels. That all seven of them would be going on to Tokyo was also a much discussed topic, especially since Harry had given Susan and Hannah their belated birthday gifts of a shopping voucher.

The adults were all lounging back on chairs, glowing lights now festooned the palm thatched umbrellas that had provided shade earlier in the day. Barchoke, Amelia and Augusta were sitting at the end table, a silencing charm up so their conversation was private.

"Barchoke, if even half of this is true, it's going to be the biggest political storm ever to hit magical Britain."

"Amelia, we have checked our facts - it's all true. I had to convince Miss Skeeter not to offer any conjecture, present the facts and let the readers make up their own minds. I take it you two already have?"

Augusta was fuming, and had struggled to hold her temper until she finished the book. Something that she and Amelia had spent the entire day reading. "How can we send our children to that school? Something needs to be done about Dumbledore and his death eater sidekick, Snape."

"Snape is no longer a problem, and we're hoping most parents will have the same reaction as you. We saw this as the best way of getting Dumbledore out the castle, only the parents of the children who attend really have the power to oust him."

The head of the DMLE had sat taking notes as she read the book, looking for things she could bring Dumbledore up on charges for. Barchoke's first remark set Amelia's alarm bells ringing. "Could you explain why Snape is no longer a problem?"

"That would be because we have him..." This news was greeted by silence so Barchoke explained how events had unfolded. "I tricked

Dumbledore into revealing Snape's identity, the old wizard still has no idea I have that information. The minister actually helped with this deceit by banning Dumbledore from the ball. I originally had an agreement for Dumbledore to give me the name on that night, I have now put him off until term starts..."

Augusta loved the deviousness of that. "...and this book gets published on the first of September - leaving Dumbledore nothing to bargain with. You still haven't explained how you ended up with Snape?"

"He decided to run, and was in the process of emptying his vault when we arrested him. The charges were crimes committed in the name of Voldemort - namely costing Harry's parents their lives. He really is a despicable piece of work, the ultimate Slytherin with a foot firmly in both camps. He gleefully told his master, Voldemort, the prophecy and then nearly soiled himself when he discovered Lily's child matched the very same prophecy."

The goblin's disgust was obvious as he talked about Snape. "He's convinced himself that Lily Evens was the love of his life, and one day she would have realised this and left James Potter for him. I knew that couple well, and that view is nothing but an utter fantasy of a sick, twisted and delusional mind. He begged Voldemort to spare Lily's life, not caring about James or Harry. Snape didn't trust Voldemort to keep his word though, so he also approached Dumbledore and confessed everything. Dumbledore actually told a group of us in his own office that the power of love would defeat Voldemort, he must have ate up the story of Severus loving Lily with a spoon."

A shudder of revulsion passed through the goblin at the thought of all this bartering in the name of love, he was sure neither of those two men had any acquaintance with the emotion. "Whether Dumbledore believed him or not, that didn't stop the old wizard blackmailing Snape to spy for him - and he then kept his spy on a short leash at Hogwarts. In return, he told the Wizengamot his spy was no death eater."

Amelia was almost afraid to ask this question, but knew she had to. "What did you do with Snape?"

"We sentenced him to five years. At the end of that time, both Neville and Harry will be of age - if they want to take things further. We thought of having him toiling in the dragon pens but that would be a waste of a resource. He's working in our potions labs, last report I got he was asking if his sentence could be increased - apparently he's never been so happy. I can arrange for you to meet him to confirm any facts, provided you can keep it quiet until the book is published."

"Well, next week I'm in Tokyo with the gang, so it would need to be after that anyway. The minister has already distanced himself and the ministry from Dumbledore, so no damage limitation to be done there."

Content that Snape was out of the picture, Augusta wanted to know if the revelation that had her asking for a sherry before noon was really true. "Albus Dumbledore and Gellert Grindelwald were really lovers?"

"Oh yes, that was actually a beautiful piece of investigative journalism by Miss Skeeter in Godric's Hollow..."

-oOoOo-

Hermione entered the Leaky Cauldron on Harry's arm, instantly spotting Professor McGonagall with the two people they were here to meet. The boy was as hyper as a springer spaniel being taken for a promised walk, he was literally bouncing with excitement. The girl reminded Hermione of the iconic poster for her favourite musical, there was a haunted look about Luna's eyes that just shouted 'Cosette'. Her clothes were certainly clean and well fitting but of such an odd assortment, Parvati would be left desperate for a chance to restyle the girl.

"Good morning, professor. Hi Luna and Colin, I'm Harry. This is Hermione, my girlfriend, and these two are Sirius Black and Professor Hobson."

Luna got in before Colin could say anything. "Didn't you use to be in the Hobboblins, Mr Boardman? My daddy says it was your fault his favourite band split."

"Oh no, that wasn't me, Luna. Though, if someone had hit me in the ear with a turnip when I was on stage, I probably would have retired too!" This earned Sirius a wide smile from the girl, before the flash from Colin's camera blinded half the pub.

"Mr Creevey, what did I tell you about that camera?"

"Sorry, Professor McGonagall, I've to save it until I get to Hogwarts."

"Precisely, your family saw the Leaky Cauldron and Diagon Alley on your induction day. There is no need for photographs today."

"But professor, they never got to meet Harry."

It was Harry who answered the excitable boy. "That's fine, Colin, but you've now taken a picture for them. We have a lot to do today, including meeting some of our friends for ice cream later. Are we ready to go?"

Harry felt Hermione squeeze his arm, drawing his attention to Henrica taking Luna by the hand. With Madam Malkin's being their first stop, both were sure she would see Luna kitted out properly for Hogwarts. This was all about getting these two settled into the castle, turning up in the right clothes was important for making those first impressions.

Ollivander's was every bit as creepy as Hermione remembered, though their circumstances didn't help with that. Old Ollivander was already pretty miffed that Harry didn't get a wand from him, the weird wizard actually got quite stropky when Harry then refused to show the wandmaker his knife. Professor McGonagall had to intervene and remind Ollivander he had two customers in his shop. Colin didn't improve things any by insisting he wanted a knife like Harry too.

Having left Flourish and Blott's to last, they joined with their friends for ice cream before facing their final task. There were now nine students at the table, the adults wisely taking one of their own.

Minerva was fascinated, and a little shocked, with Amelia's tales of Tokyo. Augusta also proclaimed this as her best summer in many years. The Patils both said they'd considered Tokyo and were delighted their girls had the opportunity to go, but they had no

complaints about choosing to spend a week in Rome instead. Henrica's comment that Rome was a city she'd always wanted to visit meant Sirius would be arranging that for next year, when she hopefully wouldn't be so busy with Gringotts.

Harry was pleased to notice Colin had quietened down somewhat, probably because of all the girls he was now surrounded by. Luna though remained really quiet. "Are you looking forward to Hogwarts, Luna? We have Ravenclaws, Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs at this table, so you should at least know someone if you get sorted into one of those three houses. We also have friends in Slytherin too, so don't worry about that."

"Oh, I'm not worried, Harry. I was just thinking it must be lovely to have so many friends..."

Hermione reached over Harry to take the little blonde's hand. "Luna, we want to be your friend too. Hogwarts can be quite daunting when you're new, but I want you to come to any of us if you need anything."

Luna looked around the table, seeing nods of agreement from Susan, Hannah, Neville and the twins. Her face broke into a simply beautiful smile. "Yes, Harry, I'm really looking forward to Hogwarts."

They headed into a crowded bookstore, noticing the person whose books made up this year's defence list was holding a book signing. Since they had no intention of purchasing those books, they didn't wait in that queue. Hermione was of course on Harry's arm - at least she was until someone shoved her out the way.

"Bless my soul, the boy-who-lived! Smile, Harry, together we rate the front paaaaain!"

Harry didn't know who this perfumed and perfectly coiffed ponce was but nobody treated Hermione like that. An arm had went around his shoulder and Harry decided it was time to put some of Remus' recent lessons into practice. He grabbed the pinky of this hand, twisting it sharply backward resulted in a girly squeal of pain from its owner. Freeing himself from the arm, Harry then swept the man's feet from under him while still keeping a painful grip on that little finger. The wizard hit the floor with a thump and Colin still didn't get

to see Harry's knife - the mere threat of having his pinky broken was enough to have Lockhart squealing like a banshee.

"Nobody touches Hermione, apologise - before I really lose my temper."

That girly voice was now shouting sorry over and over again. A blinding flash had Harry looking in Colin's direction, only to see innocence reflected back at him. The phantom photographer had now lost himself in the busy shop

Harry quickly went to check on his girlfriend, and then discovered this git had a hide on him that would put a Ukrainian Ironbelly to shame.

"I would just like to thank Harry here for helping me with that little demonstration, and take this opportunity to announce he's going to be seeing a lot more of me. Yes, ladies and gentlemen. I, Gilderoy Lockhart, Order of Merlin, Third Class, Honorary Member of the Dark Force Defense League, and five-time winner of Witch Weekly's Most-Charming-Smile, have great pleasure and pride in announcing that this September, I will be taking up the post of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry!"

Harry couldn't help but wonder at the gullibility of witches and wizards. He'd just kicked this nutter's arse, yet here were people who'd witnessed that applauding like loons at the announcement he would be teaching their children. Supposedly teaching the very thing he was obviously shit at - defence. Harry waited until the applause had died down before bursting this clown's bubble.

"Excuse me, but you appear to have been misinformed. I have a private defence tutor, one I am very happy with. I will not be in your class." He took a quick look around and recognised some of the faces in the crowd. "Guys, anyone who had Curse-breaker Weasley for defence last year with me will have the same chance again come September. You also don't need to buy these books as we won't be using them. An autobiography as well as prescribing the defence texts for all seven years, someone must really need the money?"

Gilderoy was trying not to panic, and not doing a very good job of it. "Oh come now, Harry, don't tease these good people. Surely you



and these lovely young ladies would rather have me teach you defence?" He was going for a reassuring smile but it came over as lecherous leer, one that saw Neville's arm slip protectively around Padma.

Parvati summed it up for all of them. "You're right, it really is no contest - we'll take Professor Weasley every time. He at least wears less make-up than me."

This drew laughter from the Weasley contingent in the crowd before Gilderoy found himself faced with a trio of very formidable witches.

"Oh dear, Minerva, it would appear Albus has really scraped the bottom of the barrel this time." The head of the DMLE was studying Lockhart intensely, as if waiting on a suspect to crack and confess his crimes.

Augusta agreed with her friend. "A defence professor who puts all seven of his own books on the required list - for every year mind - it's a disgrace! Is he going to be teaching the first and seventh years the same course?"

Minerva also took Hogwarts newest professor to task. "Lockhart, I don't remember you being awarded a defence O.W.L., far less an Order of Merlin. Centurion Crow's award was front page news, yours seems to have slipped past unnoticed."

Gilderoy missed McGonagall's implied insult, having just noticed the most gorgeous creature he had ever seen in his life. "Who is that?"

"That is Professor Hobson, our history teacher."

Gilderoy was thinking there was more to this job than book sales when McGonagall went and spoilt it for him. "She is here with her boyfriend, Lord Sirius Black." The name alone was enough to strike terror in Gilderoy, he would be giving that witch and her dark wizard of a boyfriend a wide berth.

Harry was now enjoying the show, watching as the three witches tore this character to shreds, when he felt a tug on his sleeve, Colin had a question. "He doesn't look a very good teacher, Harry, can we get our lessons from Curse-breaker Weasley too?"

"I'm sorry Colin, he's a very busy man. He wouldn't have time to teach first year as well."

Colin nodded in understanding but had another solution to the problem. "Couldn't you teach us then, as extra lessons? You beat him without even using magic, we would much rather learn from you."

Luna looked at him pleadingly too, "You said to ask if we needed anything?"

Hermione liked the idea. "We could make it a club, it would need to be sponsored by a professor though..."

Henrica jumped in before Lockhart could offer. "I got that covered, we just need to look at the new timetable and pick a suitable time."

The Weasley twins then got in on the act. "Hey, is this club just for firsties?"

"We don't want to buy his books either."

Gilderoy stood helpless as the entire event slipped away from him, this was already a publicity disaster - and then McGonagall really put the boot in.

"Last year, Professor Weasley held revision classes for our students sitting O.W.L.'s and N.E.W.T.'s, leading to Hogwarts best defence results in many a year. I shall personally be contacting Ambassador Barchoke in the hope we can call on this special favour again when the exams approach."

The cheer this received from those Hogwarts students in the shop had Gilderoy wanting to cry, just who was this Weasley person - and how could he possibly be more popular than him?

Molly was standing there with an armload of books she now wasn't sure she wanted signed. Harry had easily defeated this famous wizard, giving rise to the first ray of doubt. The reaction of the students toward her son, Bill, was a heart-warming moment for the mother. She'd heard from Emma how highly regarded Bill was amongst the four he was training, apparently that regard ran a lot

deeper than just four students. Her son was going to be an Assistant Ambassador, one who worked with his father.

Her two eldest sons had made career choices she hadn't agreed with at the time, but both were now proving successful in their own right. Molly was going to have a lot of time on her hands when all her children left for Hogwarts, she was planning on using some of that for quiet contemplation. The world they lived in was undoubtably changing and Molly had brought seven children into the very same world. She was not going to be left behind like those Roman relics young Harry mentioned in his speech, Molly intended to talk to Bill about this.

Ginny was ecstatic, lessons from Harry and his friends was certainly something she would be putting her name against. She also hadn't missed Harry's reaction when that fool pushed Hermione out the way. He'd been calm and controlled at the ball but hurting Hermione instantly put an end to that, Harry had their new defence professor on the floor in seconds and it certainly wasn't planned - no matter what Lockhart said.

Amelia stirred the pot some more by pulling Minerva aside for a whispered conversation. "When you're speaking to Barchoke about Bill, ask him for a copy of a book that will be released in a week or so. Gilderoy Lockhart teaching defence might be the least of your worries at Hogwarts this year."

-oOoOo-

After completing their shopping, plans were made to meet up on the platform before getting on the express. McGonagall would take both her charges home while Sirius and Henrica dropped theirs off at Gringotts. Neville and his gran were with Harry and Hermione, both eager to see if there was any sign of improvement with either Longbottom currently undergoing treatment.

The young couple left the Longbottoms, their intended destination was much deeper into Gringotts. They heard their target long before setting eyes on him, the loud shouts and clangs of clashing metal reverberating through the tunnels. Harry led his girlfriend in, both standing respectfully against the wall and waiting to be called. He'd seen what could happen to those who interrupted a lesson, it was not something Harry wished to experience personally.

Finally the bellow came in their direction. "So Centurion Crow, what can I do for you?"

Harry and Hermione both came forward and knelt before the large goblin. "Master Sharpshard, a gift from a very grateful student." Harry presented his mentor with a katana.

The handle, guard and scabbard were all jet black but the blade was polished to a silver mirror finish. "This is exquisite craftsmanship, Centurion, where did you get this?"

"Gringotts in Tokyo. They tried to palm me off with the usual junk they sell to tourists, that was until I told them it was for my sensei, Master Sharpshard. Mentioning your name had a profound effect, they all wanted to be the maker who supplied Master Sharpshard with a katana."

"Even after leaving, he's still sucking up. Teacher's little pup!"

The insult was said loud enough for Harry to hear, and sarcastically enough to more than imply an insult. Harry had cursed his luck when he first spotted just who was in this class, he had no intention though of just kneeling there and swallowing this insult. "Why Dragonbreath, I didn't know you missed me? Speaking of pups, I see you still have the manners of a dog - poking that wet nose in where it's not wanted and whining like a bitch. I'm also amazed you can hear what we're saying when you're all the way over there, especially with those tiny ears of yours."

Dragontooth's insults had the class sniggering, Harry's reply had them laughing out loud. Insulting a goblin's name, ear size and nose in one go was impressive. The goblin those insults were aimed at didn't think so.

"You and your ugly human bitch strut around Gringotts wearing our sacred blades, you are nothing more than a festering boil on our proud nation, a boil that needs to be lanced before it poisons all of us."

Harry now stood and faced his antagonist. "Everyone here knows you possess neither the skill nor courage to do that lancing,

Dragonbreath. We can settle this right now, and I'll even allow you to choose two friends to help - that is if you have two friends?"

The glint of triumph in the goblin's eyes alerted Harry he'd been duped, he was just about to find out how badly he'd been trapped. "...and I will allow your human bitch to fight by your side, let's see if she can even hold a blade."

At that, Hermione was by Harry's side, surprising everyone in the class by answering in their own tongue. "I accept! Fighting a female would appear to be about your limit."

Harry then pulled her to the side for a quick word while the class prepared for the fight. "Hermione, this isn't wooden swords we'll be fighting with, the duel doesn't finish until someone is bleeding."

"I know, Harry, I also know he baited you into this, I wasn't having you losing face over me. It would probably be a deadly insult to both parties but he reminded me so much of Draco Malfoy."

"His uncle was one of those my father fought in the pit, to say there is bad blood between us would be a massive understatement. They'll be cocky and showing off to their friends, stick to defence and I will take them out as quickly as I possibly can. Your dad's gonna kill me for getting you into this, and then your mum will dance on my dead body."

Hermione gave him a kiss for luck before enlarging and fitting her shield on her left arm. She could feel her bracelet expanding up the same arm, obviously recognising the danger she was in. Harry had been teaching her for a year but these goblins would have a lot more training and experience than that. This would also give her an indicator of just where she was with a blade, Hermione could only hope it wouldn't be too painful a lesson.

Like Hermione's top, Harry's T-shirt was loose enough to cope with his armour under it. Using his armour wasn't really fair to his opponents but Harry didn't give a shit. Hermione was in this fight, he intended to make it as short as possible. He knew the class would expect him to use his armour, no goblin would ever surrender an advantage they had in a fight.

Master Sharpshard found himself thrust into the role of referee, he called the five combatants forward. There were no flowery speeches, he just told it like it was. "First blood, fight!"

The trio of goblin's intentions became apparent at once, all three rushed at Hermione. Harry managed to intercept two of them but Dragontooth got through. Thankfully he was showboating for the audience, giving Hermione time to block with her shield. This form of attack also left the goblin wide open to the counter, Hermione took her gifted opportunity. With a triumphant cry, her thrust caught Dragontooth off guard and her blade nicked his shoulder - clearly drawing blood.

She glanced round to see Harry had already dealt with one, and just about to dispatch the other. That was her mistake.

With her guard now down, Dragontooth lashed out at Hermione - his blade slicing diagonally across her torso between shoulder and hip before Harry hit him like a golden version of the Hogwarts Express. Weapons forgotten, Harry was pummeling the shrieking goblin with his fists until the massive form of Master Sharpshard pulled him off.

Harry then remembered what happened and turned to see Hermione trying to piece her clothing back together with her wand, her repaired clothing once more covering the golden webbing that had prevented her being seriously injured.

A bloody Dragontooth couldn't believe he hadn't even damaged the human bitch. "She's wearing centurion armour, that's an instant death sentence!"

Harry's only thought was to protect Hermione. For this to work, he needed to change her status. "Everyone clearly saw my family design on that armour, it's not centurion. Hermione is my mate, and therefore part of my family." The entire class, including the instructor, were now gaping at this revelation from Harry, it was time for some proof. He retrieved his sword from where he had dropped it and sliced open his palm.

Realising what Harry was doing, Hermione didn't hesitate for a second. She used her own blade to mirror Harry's actions. Their bloody hands were then joined, clasped palm to palm, as Harry said the words.

"You are mine, and I am yours."

Hermione's eyes were sparkling with tears, tears that the pain in her hand played no part in, as she gave the required response.

"You are mine, and I am yours."

A silver glow started at their hands and spread up their arms, it had turned golden by the time both were enveloped by it - clearly showing that magic had accepted their vows. The young couple leaned forward to kiss each other, neither noticing their hands were completely healed. With his arm around Hermione's waist, Harry once more turned his attention back to Dragontooth.

"Today was nothing more than a thinly disguised assassination attempt on my mate. Even when she beat you in the fight, you proceeded with your plan. You will answer to me for that - in the pit."

Harry and Hermione then bowed to Master Sharpshard before leaving the class, a class that had just descended into utter chaos.

Hermione waited until they were out of earshot before speaking to Harry. "What just happened in there?"

"In the eyes of the nation, we are now mates. That bastard will face me in the pit for his attack on you, that entire family has no honour. The only question now is who will kill me first, my father or yours."

Hermione though was concentrating on something else, "Why does this pit sound so ominous?"

They were heading straight for Barchoke's office when Harry supplied the answer she'd dreaded hearing. "When two goblins enter the pit, only one comes out alive."

Hermione's legs may have kept going but her mind had shut down at that part.

-oOoOo-

This had to be done publicly, it had to be seen to be scrupulously fair and it had to be done today. Ragnok had already heard from

Barchoke that Harry wasn't backing down an inch, with Sharpshard confirming that Dragontooth had struck after being defeated in the duel - the blow was also of such a nature and ferocity that Harry's claims of an assassination attempt could neither be ignored or dismissed as fanciful.

Word of this incident had spread like wildfire through the nation and the benches around the court were already almost full. Both families were now in front of him, Miss Granger at her mate's side. Time to get these proceedings started.

"Centurion Crow, you have made some very serious charges and invoked trial by combat. Do you wish to change your mind?"

"No, Director, I wish to proceed as our law dictates."

Having expected no other answer, Barchoke addressed the court. "Master Sharpshard was present during the entire event, I trust there are none here who would question the validity of his memories?"

No one wanted to make that challenge so they settled down to watch Sharpshard's memory of the incident broadcast. Some laughter at the initial insults soon died down as everyone concentrated on the fight itself. All goblins had at least some training in weapons, this knowledgeable audience clearly saw the overconfident boy showing off to his class - only to get nicked on the shoulder by his less skilful but more focused opponent. His actions then set off roars of protest at a cowardly attack, an attack that could really have only one design - to cause major damage to this female. There was total silence as they witnessed two magical humans both become bonded as mates by the most goblin of ceremonies.

"How was my son supposed to know they were mates? I think it's disgusting humans allow this so young..."

He was cut off by Barchoke, in no mood to make any concessions whatsoever. "My son and his mate's honour was clearly displayed throughout this incident for all to see, as was your offspring's cowardice and treachery. Like us, the humans consider these two far too young to officially become mates. They have already made their choice known though, a choice we just witnessed being accepted by magic. Both certainly intend to wait until they are the appropriate age before taking the next step. This issue aside, Miss



Granger was also very clearly under the protection of my house. If the councillor wishes to refute this protection, my family stands ready to instigate a blood feud."

With that, the lines in the sand were now very clearly drawn.

Dragontooth's father was raging at his son for being so blatant - and getting caught, that didn't mean he was going to stand back and let him be slaughtered in the pit. Even from watching Sharpshard's memory, the result of any such contest couldn't be in any doubt. Were Dragontooth to face Crow, it would be like sending a lamb to slaughter.

"My son is not of age, I claim the right to nominate a champion on his behalf."

Harry then spoke up. "Your son is over a year older than me, but I'm still prepared to step into the pit."

"That's your father's decision to make, I will work within the law to protect my son."

"Since my mate has already defeated your son, I understand this cowardice. Know this though, I will fight your nominated champion. After I defeat him, I swear I will cut your son's ears off if he ever comes anywhere near my mate again."

Spurred on by the gasps that this most severe of threats had drawn from the crowd, Dragontooth's father turned on Barchoke. "Are you going to stand there and let this boy issue threats, and even consider letting him enter the pit of justice?"

"My son is a centurion, a centurion who has also been awarded the highest honour the Ministry of Magic has to offer, he doesn't need to hide behind his father. As to making threats, let me reiterate my son's words. I will not stand idly by and watch these two young people be sniped at by those who think they are better. His mate already has friend of our nation status and can clearly be seen to be learning our ways. My son has publicly sworn on his blood to defend the nation, and will today fight in the pit of justice on a matter of goblin honour. What more would you want of them?"

Ragnok really had no option. He may be the Director, but the law had to be obeyed. "I find the claim against Dragontooth to be proven, and therefore I have no reason to block this honour duel. I find Dragontooth's cowardly attack to be particularly disgusting, but again I'm powerless to intervene and grant him the champion his father has requested. Now let's get this over with."

Hermione found they were quickly joined by Master Sharpshard. "Bear up, Lass, they will be watching your behaviour almost as closely as that of your mate. Crow, only I know what you are really capable of, now is the time to display it for all to see. Not only must you win, you must do it in a manner that ensures you and your mate can safely walk around Gringotts. Scrape a victory and you might as well declare yourself a wizard now, because they would be queuing up to get you in the pit - and they all now know just how to achieve that. A threat to your mate has you rushing headlong to defend her. This fight is not just for your safety, Hermione's life is threatened here too."

Harry nodded, his face a mask of concentration. He bowed to Master Sharpshard, kissed a trembling Hermione before bowing to his father - it was time.

Hermione knew Barchoke and Master Sharpshard were offering words of comfort as she sat wedged between the two, she didn't hear any of it. Her entire being was focused on Harry, and the large goblin that waited on him in the appropriately named pit. The enclosure had a sandy base - better for absorbing spilt blood - about sixty feet in diameter and with walls at least four feet deep. While the entire arena was lit entirely by flaming torches, Harry's golden armour made him easily visible - though the massive battleaxe the goblin held certainly grabbed Hermione's attention too.

They stood about twenty feet apart, bowing to each other before Ragnok set the proceedings under way. "To the death, fight!"

Apparently, normal behaviour for these fights predetermined that the two combatants would circle each other, probing to assess their opponent's strengths and weaknesses before making a move. The big goblin had other ideas, he thought he was facing a human child and wanted this over with quickly - unknowingly playing straight into his opponent's greatest strength. Dragontooth's 'champion' was merely hired muscle, not too smart and the large bag of gold offered

had instantly destroyed any reservations the greedy goblin might have had about his opponent. He also wasn't too bothered about the centurion armour his opponent possessed, positive his battleaxe would penetrate it.

With a roar, the goblin charged as he swung that great axe in what would be a killing blow should it connect. In a move that Hermione had seen Harry use on Master Sharpshard, the sword of Gryffindor sliced right through the shaft of the goblin's axe. Harry was moving quicker than seemed possible. Having sliced through the shaft, Harry continued his move and pirouetted on his planted foot - bringing his sword back around so the goblin's own charge saw him skewer himself on the ancient goblin blade.

The point of Harry's sword entered the charging goblin's throat, and exited the back of his neck - severing his spine on the way out. With his spinal cord severed, the goblin's body hit the sand like a sack of shit - with Harry's sword still embedded in situ.

With the life visibly leaving his opponent's eyes, Harry retrieved the damaged axe and knelt beside his dying opponent - laying the weapon gently on the goblin's chest. "You faced me and fought with honour, unlike those you championed." When the goblin was finally dead, Harry removed his sword from the body and left the pit with his head held high - to utter silence.

Hermione wanted to race straight too him, she'd never seen Harry more in need of someone to hold on to - she really needed one of Harry's hugs herself. There was probably only her and his father who could see how much this was costing Harry, watching as Harry fought a duel to the death was certainly no picnic for them either. Barchoke held her arm and Hermione was thankful for the support, she didn't think she could have moved otherwise.

Harry took Hermione's other arm as the three of them left the still silent chamber.

It was Ragnok who finally broke the silence after the party had left. "I know there were those amongst you who silently questioned my sanity when I made Crow a centurion, I hope he has answered those doubters for both of us today. Master Sharpshard's opinion is that Crow will some day become one of our greatest ever warriors, and he fought today purely as a goblin. By using the magic he

possesses, Crow could have ended this contest before his opponent even got near enough to use his axe."

This was more than enough to convince those watching that Centurion Crow was someone you wanted on your side, never facing you from the other side of the pit. The rumours that he had defeated Master Sharpshard were now being believed, how do you fight someone that moves twice as quick as you do? - and still has magic to call on if he needs it.

Harry and Hermione managed to hold themselves together while Barchoke led them back to their dwelling, the door was barely closed before both of them collapsed sobbing into each other's arms. As Barchoke watched his son and new daughter come apart at the horror they'd just performed / witnessed, the goblin took a leaf from Emma's book. Laying the couple down in the seating area, he gently tucked a blanket around them both. He would need to leave them like that for a few moments, Harry and Hermione needed the Grangers here as quickly as possible. Emma's gentle touch and soothing words were required while he would then attempt to explain to Dan exactly what had happened here today.

-oOoOo-

The front page picture of Harry standing over a clearly terrified Gilderoy Lockhart was not how Albus had hoped his new defence professor would announce himself to the country. It had all been so carefully set-up too, book signing, large crowd and guaranteed media coverage - how could that go so disastrously wrong? It was only when he opened the paper and his old eyes caught the vivid advert for a soon to be published book that he sensed the real danger. The title alone had his stomach in a knot, he could see 'The life and lies of Albus Dumbledore' becoming an instant bestseller. When the phrase 'will reveal all' jumped out at him, Albus felt his bowels loosening.

A/N thanks for reading.

## Chapter 36

Both fathers glanced up as Emma reentered the room. "They're sleeping now, but only fitfully. What the hell happened today?"

"I thought it would be better if I showed you. Sharpshard knew I'd want the memory, even after how things turned out. I'll be translating so please save any questions until the memory is finished. We'll be here all night if necessary, but I promise I'll answer every one of them."

They watched Harry and Hermione's visit to Master Sharpshard, with Barchoke filling in the background when he wasn't directly translating. Emma had to stuff her fist in her mouth to halt a scream that would have woken the sleeping couple after Dragontooth sliced at Hermione when she wasn't looking. Both were enthralled at the glow that covered the couple, and neither argued with Harry's assessment that this was nothing more than a grasped opportunity to seriously harm their daughter.

After the memory finished playing, Dan took a moment before saying anything. There were things happening here beyond his comprehension and he didn't want to begin shouting. He had the feeling that once he started shouting, he wouldn't be able to stop. After watching their daughter almost get disembowelled with a sword, Dan felt he was entitled to do a bit of shouting.

"Barchoke, I thank you, Harry, and every deity I can think of for that bracelet on my daughter's wrist. Please understand though, a very big part of me is currently wishing I'd kicked McGonagall's arse right out our door when she pulled that 'your daughter's a witch' shit. Hermione seems to be lurching from one life-threatening incident to another, I don't know how much more of this I can take."

Emma shifted so she could put her arm around her husband, seeking and gaining comfort. She had a question she wanted answered before her husband exploded. "What was the cut hands and that golden glow all about?"

"In the eyes of some goblins, Hermione is thought of as a lesser being - much like some of the more radical purebloods try to look down on her. Sadly, the nation is not without its bigotry too. Harry claiming they were mates instantly changed her status, their public

display of bonding will stop any and all harassment." This was greeted with silence so Barchoke continued talking.

"When my mate and I bonded, we glowed right up our arms and into our torsos - and that was considered a very strong bonding. What those two did today, well, I've never seen anything like it."

Dan's voice was very quiet as he asked a question that had no place in any sane conversation about two twelve year olds. "Are you trying to tell me they're married?"

"Inside the nation, they will be considered mates. Outside of that, no - though you might find the occasional elf referring to Hermione as Lady Potter."

This was the final straw, the straw that broke Dan. "Emma, go get Hermione, we're going home!"

"Dan, calm down a moment and think. How would we even get home..."

Calm was something Dan wasn't capable of at the moment. "We'll fucking walk if we need to, anything to get our baby away from here..."

Barchoke held his hands up in an attempt to stop Dan's imminent eruption. "There will be no need for anyone to walk. I need to show you something else first, then, if you still want to go, I'll take you home. What you just watched was unfortunately only act one, it was the second act that has our children really upset. You need to see this so you both know what you're dealing with."

He then played his own memory of what happened next, to stunned silence from the Grangers. Barchoke was attempting to accentuate the positive from this. "As Harry's mate, Hermione can now walk around Gringotts with impunity. No one will want to challenge Harry now."

Dan wasn't buying into that, he was looking at the situation from a whole different perspective. "You made my little girl sit and watch that? Emma, get Hermione - we're going home right now."

"Dan, wait, let's discuss this..." Emma could only watch helplessly as her husband stormed right past her. He returned dragging a sleepy and shocked Hermione with him, a Hermione who, now seeing her father's intentions, began fighting with him every step of the way and screaming for Harry.

The boy who had been so decisive in battle earlier stood holding onto the door jamb, totally lost at what to do next.

"Barchoke, we're ready to go home." Hermione's cries of anguish were being totally ignored by her father.

"Harry, I'll be right back son. Hermione's father has decided she's going home for the evening. Somehow, I don't think you're invited." Barchoke took Emma's hand before grabbing Dan firmly by the arm and portkeying the Granger family home.

-oOoOo-

Emma finally entered the lounge, she sat on a chair well away from her husband - not even looking in his direction, far less speaking to him.

"Is she asleep?"

"After crying for over three hours, she's exhausted - I don't know if I would class that as sleep."

"She'll understand..."

"How can she understand, I don't understand!"

"She watched Harry kill that goblin today!"

"Daniel Granger, you have become the thing I hate most - a fucking hypocrite! You tell your daughter to talk things out and then, when you really need to sit and talk things out, you go all captain caveman and drag Hermione out of there. Those two have had a pretty traumatic day, you increased that trauma tenfold by your actions."

"I will not have my daughter married before her thirteenth birthday..."

"Ah, so now we come to the real reason. Did you honestly think those two were treating this as their wedding night?" Emma was shaking her head, trying to rationalise what happened tonight. "We've both seen what that boy can do, he could have stopped you tonight with one hand tied behind his back. The only reason he didn't was out of respect - a respect you lost tonight. Did you notice you were suddenly relegated to 'Hermione's father' by Barchoke? You lost both their respect, along with Hermione's - and mine too!"

"Hermione will come around when we enrol her in a new school - one that doesn't have trolls."

"You can't do that, your daughter is a witch and we signed that right over to Barchoke. Good luck with getting him to rescind it, especially since neither Hermione or I will agree with you on that point. You will also have to arrange cover for my patients, I'll be staying home with Hermione until it's time for her to return to Hogwarts."

Emma noticed their holiday photographs still sitting in packets, they had planned on placing the best ones in an album of their summer holidays. She grabbed them and threw the lot at her husband, the packets opens in flight - scattering pictures all around him.

"There is the girl you profess to love, you'll notice she's smiling in every single one of those picture. I suggest you put them in frames, it's probably the last time you'll see her smile. She asked me why her dad would rip her heart out, I had no answer to give her. You needn't bother figuring one out tell her later, Hermione has no intention of speaking to you ever again."

She got up to leave but had a parting comment for her husband. "If you had just hurt Hermione, you might be able to ride this one out. She was looking into Harry's eyes as you dragged her out of there, she'll never forgive you for the pain you caused him tonight. I'll be sleeping in Hermione's room, try not to waken us when you leave in the morning."

Dan was left sitting there, surrounded by memories of a wonderful summer - a summer that just turned to shit. He really wanted a stiff drink but had patients tomorrow, a good few of Emma's patient's would end up in his chair too. He hoped things looked better in the cold light of day, they appeared pretty fucked up at two a.m.



-oOoOo-

Albus hated getting old, his knees were bloody killing him. He'd been kneeling in the fireplace all morning, with no results to show for all the pain. All he could discover was a company called Aletheia Printing would be distributing these cursed books to the shops, and handling the mail orders through Gringotts. The adverts in the Prophet were vague enough to generate interest yet not give Albus clues about what to expect, they were also handled through Gringotts.

Someone was being very clever here, knowing Albus had no contacts with the goblins. He hoped they weren't being too clever, since Aletheia meant truth - something he was especially averse to.

-oOoOo-

Five incredibly long days, five of the worst days of his life. It wasn't the coming home to no dinner being made for him, he got that message loud and clear when there was no coffee or breakfast ready in the morning. It wasn't even having to iron his own shirts or sleeping alone. That his daughter would leave any time he entered a room really hurt, but that still wasn't the worse. It was the silence that was slowly killing Dan. His wife did speak, but about nothing of consequence. Hermione hadn't uttered a word in his presence since that night. The Grangers had always been a family that talked, and he was the one to shatter that trait into tiny pieces.

Hermione had thrown herself into more intensive training, Dan suspected it was just to keep out of his way. She would be out running when he got up for work, and then again when he came home. If tonight followed it's usual pattern, she would come in from her run and then practice in the garden with a wooden sword - her real one being left behind in Gringotts.

She entered the house, grabbed a bottle of water and headed straight for the garden - all the while ignoring her father's very existence. He watched through the window as she practiced against imaginary foes, Dan wondered how many of them would wear his face. It was long past time to take some action so he headed out there.

"Hermione? Hermione, you can't ignore me forever."

Hermione seemed to be making a right good attempt at that very feat, causing Dan to lose his temper. "Hermione, I am your father and you will stop this nonsense..."

He reached for her shoulder, only to find his hand batted away with her practice sword as Hermione spun to face him. "Don't touch me!"

"Why you..."

As Dan once more reached for his daughter, he found Hermione's wooden sword was far quicker than he was.

"I - said - don't - touch - me!" Each word was emphasised by a blow or a poke with the pole. Hermione though began to lose her own temper and didn't stop there. "Tell - me - why? - Why? - WHY?"

At this point Emma arrived and grabbed a now crying Hermione, gently leading her back inside the house. Dan was stunned at his daughter's actions, but what hurt far more than any blows was the look of loathing in her eyes as she was doing it. He was sitting under the tree when Emma returned.

"I've really fucked up big time, haven't I?"

His wife didn't think he was looking for an answer to that question. Instead, she told him something she'd learned from Hermione. "Between the incidents that day, Barchoke had a little time with them. He sat Hermione down and said, while the conditions weren't exactly ideal, he was delighted to welcome her to the family. Goblin custom decreed that she was now considered his daughter too, something he was going to do his very best to be worthy of. Compare those actions to yours and then answer your own question."

Emma then made her own position on this matter crystal clear. "I carried that girl for nine months, Dan, nearly died giving birth to her. You may be prepared to allow your pigheadedness to ruin your relationship with our daughter, I am not. You may have valid reasons for what you did, but there can be no excuse for the way you carried it out. One way or another, our entire future is tied to these people. You dragged Hermione out of there as if Harry had some fatally contagious disease, a disease you desperately didn't

want your daughter to catch. I don't know how, or even if, you can come back from that."

Emma walked back into the house, leaving Dan wishing the ground would open up and swallow him.

-oOoOo-

Albus was sitting at breakfast but not eating. Today was his favourite day of the entire year, the day the witches and wizards of tomorrow came back into his sphere of influence. Last year's first of September was marred by a certain goblin-raised boy attending Hogwarts, that could pale into insignificance compared to this blasted book. Today's headline in the Prophet was all about the new goblin treaty being signed yesterday, he dreaded to think what tomorrow's front page would be.

There was also the question of how to get his hands on a copy, he could hardly walk into Flourish and Blott's and buy one. Having the book owl delivered was also fraught with danger, he was certain the media would pick up on this. As to getting someone to buy it for him, there was really only Hagrid he could trust to carry that out. If he asked Hagrid, Albus might as well place his own advert in the Prophet saying he'd read the book. There was also the deniability aspect to consider, 'since I wouldn't read such a thing, I can't really comment on it' was an attractive option.

Knowledge though was like the most addictive of drugs to Albus, just something that he had to have. His problem was actually solved from the most unlikely of sources, Minerva dropped a plain covered book beside his untouched plate.

"A friend arranged a pre-release copy for me. Do Hogwarts a favour, leave before you drag us down with you."

No more words were exchanged or needed, the book found its way into Albus' pocket as he headed for his office - leaving his breakfast still untouched. He needed to do some serious reading before the express arrived.

-oOoOo-

There was excitement in the Granger household today, something that had been sadly missing in the ten or so days following the happenings in Gringotts. Emma entered her daughter's room to see a hyper Hermione with a big smile on her face.

"...and I thought you were excited about going to Hogwarts last year?"

Both smiled at that, and recognised Hermione was a totally different girl from the one that boarded the train last September. Their problem stemmed from one member of the family not realising just how much she had changed.

"Hermione, your dad wants to go with us to the station..."

"No!"

"Hermione, I think he now realises what he's done..."

"He has no idea what he's done, nor does he care. Harry had just killed someone to keep me safe, you can't understand what that did to him. We were both in a bad place but coping, as long as we were together we could handle it. He took that away from us."

Emma could see the determination in her daughter's eyes, it was as she'd feared. Anyone hurting Hermione drew a predictable response from Harry, their daughter though was every bit as protective of her mate. She'd had long conversations with her daughter about what this meant, and had been greatly relieved to learn the answer. In the short term, not very much. They had no intention of letting any outside factors sway the pace at which their relationship developed. Emma was further relieved to hear her daughter say that she would probably have to be the one to instigate any further steps, Harry was far too much of a gentleman to ever be presumptuous.

Hermione wasn't finished with her rant, though was trying her best not to let anger get the better of her. "Every letter I send, I'm continually having to reassure Harry I don't think any less of him, something a hug would do instantly. He took that away from us too. Harry has had to live all his life knowing his only living relatives didn't want him, he now has another name to add to that list - a man

he actually respected. Until I can make sure Harry's ok, and that we're still good, there will be no sympathy coming from me."

Emma could clearly see what was really behind Hermione's belligerent attitude. Her father had very deliberately attempted to drive a wedge between her and Harry, there would be no steps toward forgiveness possible until their daughter could confirm his attempt had failed. Hermione wouldn't be able to do that to her satisfaction until she actually got to talk with Harry, and of course hug the boy to within an inch of his life.

"Your dad is still insisting on going to the station with us. You may be able to use magic that stops him coming into your room, I don't think you'll be able to do that for Kings Cross station. Unless you have another method of getting to the platform, I don't see you avoiding this."

Hermione's smile was almost predatory. "Betsy!"

A small pop announced the arrival of an obviously female elf. "Yes, mistress, how can Betsy help?"

She knelt to be at eye level with the eager little servant. "Betsy, would it be possible for me and my mother to be taken to platform nine and three quarters?"

"Oh easy, mistress. Just call for Betsy when you are ready to leave."

With another pop, she was gone, leaving Hermione to speak with her surprised mother. "Since Harry and I performed the goblin ceremony of mates, the Potter elves call me mistress. Betsy is my personal elf. She was originally terrified of me, thinking I wanted to set her free. Seeing the hurt I was causing her forced me to change my mind about elves. Harry was right, it's just a matter of perspective. Betsy is part of our family and I will treat her as such. She's happiest when busy taking care of me and sometimes I'm even deliberately messy now. I will be making my own way to the express. You're welcome to come with me, he is not."

Emma left, knowing this news would go down as well as telling a patient they needed root canal treatment. It would be painful and costly, but Dan really had only himself to blame.

-oOoOo-

Harry was beginning to lose it. "SIRIUS! If this is your idea of a prank, I'm really not in the mood."

A bemused godfather stuck his head in the door. "What's up, pup? Marauders honour, I wouldn't dream of pulling a prank on you today."

"My stuff keeps shifting around the room when my back is turned. I'm trying to get ready but it's almost like something doesn't want me to go..." Realisation hit Harry at that point. "...or someone! Potter elves to me."

Multiple pops saw Harry's bedroom at Grimmauld soon fill with elves. "I think we have an intruder. I don't want him harmed, just caught and brought to me."

It was only seconds later that three elves returned, the trio also had a hold of a struggling Dobby. "Stand still, Dobby, no one here wants to hurt you - but this has to stop."

"Harry Potter must not return to Hogwarts. Terrible things will happen there, terrible things..."

"Hermione will be on that train, and terrible things will happen to anyone trying to stop me joining her, understand?"

Dobby was about to say that he received threats like this on a daily basis, that was until he looked into those green eyes. Dobby now knew he'd never been threatened like this before. Terrible things would indeed befall anyone trying to keep Harry Potter from his mate. He nodded his understanding.

"I understand you're trying to help, Dobby, I really do. This is not the way though. If you can give me any clues or specific warnings, I would really appreciate it. If not, just stay out my way. Let him go, guys."

No sooner had Dobby been released than he was off, something Harry would soon need to do too.

-oOoOo-

Harry was heading for the barrier when probably the last person in the world he wanted to see stepped out in front of him. "Harry, can I have a quick word?"

"Not at the moment, Mr Granger, I'm in a hurry."

Dan was ready to insist when a primeval part of his brain screamed not to be so bloody stupid. The same part of the brain that kept our ancestors alive in the days when man was not the top predator in the land. One look at Harry was enough to confirm this would not just be a bad mistake, it might be the last mistake he ever made.

"Very well, Harry, have a good year."

A quick one-armed hug from Sirius and he melted through the brickwork, leaving Dan with an irate godfather on his hands.

"I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt, and assume you were about to apologise to my godson. Otherwise, you and I have nothing further to say to one another."

"I was hoping to, yes. At least Harry was civil, Hermione refuses to even speak to me. She's done some kind of magic that won't even allow me into her room!"

This left Sirius shaking his head. "She controls the wards on your home. They need to be tied to someone magical, she could probably stop you entering your own house. You have no idea the trouble you've caused, or just how much shit you could be in. We need to go somewhere and talk."

"We need to wait for Emma first, I'm giving her a lift home. Hermione arranged transport onto the platform for both of them, I drove here on my own - I've been on my own a lot lately."

Hermione was early, that was to be expected, Harry running late was not. Her anxiety levels climbed every time the hand on the platform clock moved a minute closer to eleven. She was surrounded by their friends, all of whom were somewhat aware of what was going on. Hermione had told them her father had gotten very angry about something, and dragged her away from Harry.

That she hadn't seen him since their day in Diagon Alley more than accounted for the anxiety she was displaying.

The group should actually have gotten on the train as they were causing a bit of an obstruction, Hermione didn't care. She wasn't moving from that spot until Harry arrived. As the tallest amongst them, it was Neville who spotted him first.

"He's here!"

Hermione took off in the direction Neville had indicated, only stopping when she crashed into her boyfriend. Arms wrapped around each other, they discovered that kissing and talking at the same time was something they would need to practice.

Just having her back in his arms made everything in Harry's world okay, he just needed one final piece of reassurance. He whispered in Hermione's ear. "Are we good?"

"No, Harry, we're bloody great!"

Their needy hug was broken by a familiar voice. "You two need to get on the train, you have a long trip to get reacquainted."

"Hello, Mrs Granger..."

She remembered what Hermione said and let her actions speak for her. She pulled Harry into a hug. "It's Emma, Harry, just Emma. Perhaps, in a few years, we may give something else a try. I don't think either of us is quite ready for that yet."

Harry thought he couldn't be any happier, only to be proved wrong. Emma kissed them both before shooing them in the direction of their waiting friends. More hugs of greeting was followed by a quick hello to Colin's parents, and a promise to keep an eye on him. Luna was coming with the Weasleys, who were apparently notorious for running late.

They needed two compartments, counting Luna, and possibly Ginny too. Just as the train was getting ready to leave, the redheads arrived.



Sensing that the four had things to talk about, Susan offered that they would go and find Luna - now that the train was pulling away. Harry appreciated that, but had another task they could help with at the same time. He opened his trunk and started piling up books on the floor.

"Transfiguration, I thought you said there wasn't any books on goblin transfiguration?"

"There aren't, Susan, and neither are these. I just didn't want them getting confiscated."

A book that might be confiscated was certainly one Parvati had an interest in. One look inside the cover had the witch doing her happy dance, here was enough gossip material to last until Christmas. "Oh Harry, can I get a copy for Lavender?"

"Well, since I want this spread all over the castle, I can't think of two better witches for the job." The smile Harry wore robbed the words of any intentional hurt. A hug from Parvati saw her shoot out of there with her pockets full of Dumbledore's expose. Susan and Hannah also took more than a few copies, promising to make sure at least a couple ended up in the hands of Slytherins.

When it was just the four of them, it was Padma who then broached the elephant in the room. "What the hell happened that would make Dan go off like that, did he catch you two in bed together or something?" Padma had tried to inject some levity into the situation, she wasn't prepared for Hermione's answer.

With Harry back at her side, Hermione found she could actually crack a joke about something that yesterday was too painful to even mention. "Something like that, he actually dragged me right out of Harry's bed!" Seeing their two best friends with their chins on the floor gave Hermione her first laugh in over a week. It was time to tell their story.

-oOoOo-

Sirius waited until their order was delivered to the booth before erecting a privacy charm. "I need you both to sit, drink your coffee and listen. Halloween, nineteen eighty one, I made the wrong decision and it harmed my godson. I spent ten years in Azkaban

because of that mistake, yet Barchoke barely forgave me. I only got back into my godson's life because Harry wanted it, and his father thought his son needed me. I know I won't get another chance and will do my damndest to ensure I don't screw up again."

He needed a sip of his own tea before continuing. "When I saw that memory of their bonding, I'm not ashamed to say I cried. I thought it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen, and I have Henrica Hobson for a girlfriend. I don't know Hermione nearly as well as I'd like to but a blind man could see she loves my godson - almost as much as Harry loves her. The last week or so has been hell - watching as that young man questioned everything in his life was not a pleasant experience."

Emma had tears in her eyes as she answered Sirius. "Hermione has been the same, the only time I've seen her happy was when she finally met Harry at the station. How can we fix this, Sirius?"

"I am not the problem, Emma, you have a very angry goblin - and his bewildered son - to deal with. Harry now thinks Dan hates him, and will try to take Hermione away - not something I would advise."

"What makes you say that, Sirius?"

"You could lose her, Emma, and I'm being deadly serious here. Hermione belongs in our world now, a world where you have practically no opinion, never mind rights. Deliberately keeping Hermione from her bonded mate could see you lose custody of your daughter, especially if that mate is my godson. He has an 'in' with the ministry that would see such a request almost instantly granted. You've seen enough of how our system works to know this is true. Harry has killed to protect Hermione, he'll do whatever is necessary where she is concerned. Shit - if Harry declared himself Lord Potter, Fudge would change the law to let them marry the following day."

Emma was in bits at this news, Dan was in tears too. "What can I do? I'll do anything, Sirius, I'm desperate here."

"First thing, stay away from Barchoke. You not only ripped the guts out his son, you also hurt the girl he now legally calls his daughter. Hurting a goblin's children, well, not a smart move. You saw the memory of Harry in the pit, Barchoke has entered it twice to protect his son - don't let the suit fool you."

Emma now had her husband by the lapels of his jacket, pulling him toward her. "Daniel Granger, you will fix this! I don't care if you have to crawl to Hogwarts on your hands and knees, you will bloody fix what you broke. I will not lose her, I can't lose her..." She then lost it and buried her head into Dan's chest, it didn't mask her sobs as Emma's heart broke.

The tears were really flowing now from Dan too, Sirius had to cast a mild confundus charm as they were starting to attract attention, even with the silencing charm up. "The key to this is Harry, and the way to Harry is through Hermione. I'll be seeing them both this weekend and I'll happily carry any letters you want - but that's it. I think what you did was abysmal, and don't really know where that came from. That should have been one of the happiest days of their lives, it was never going to be because Harry had to step in the pit. You have to understand, Harry now thinks he's a murderer - and no longer good enough for Hermione. You did that, and I think I have a right to know why?"

Dan did his best to explain the emotional turmoil that night produced. "I was still trying to come to terms with not losing Hermione to that attack, only to discover I was going to lose my little girl anyway. Harry is handsome, incredibly rich, so very well mannered and on first name terms with government leaders. My daughter is also head over heels in love with him - and now they're practically married. I just couldn't cope with any more and panicked, I had to get my family away."

Dan looked down at his hands and saw they were shaking. "I'm a dentist, Sirius, I spend my days looking into people's mouths. I thought my hobby of shooting was a walk on the wild side, add a bit of danger to my life, but paper targets don't fire back. I've never even shot at a rabbit, yet Harry can't go to a ball without someone having a go at him. I keep telling myself I'm okay with this but, obviously I'm not. Hermione attended that same ball with a sword at her hip, her wand in a holster on her arm and two shields as part of her belt. As her father, I should be the one protecting the children, she beat me up with a wooden sword - holding back too I'll bet. I was a drowning man, Sirius, jumping into the liferaft of the life we had before - only to discover that life doesn't exist anymore. The last ten days have been a constant nightmare for all of us, and I don't know what to do about it."

A still tearful Emma tried to help her husband. "How do you feel about Harry?"

"Shit, that could have us here all day! On the one hand he's this kind, gentle, fun loving soul with eyes that captured both of my girls the moment they met him. He's so bloody honourable that he would put knights of yore to shame. Watching the two of them dance together never fails to make me smile at how well they fit together, and how happy he makes my daughter. Then he detects a threat to Hermione and Centurion Crow turns up - kicking arse and taking no shit from anyone." Dan was shaking his head at the inconsistencies he'd just described, but the dentist wasn't finished yet. "There is also the boy that has been at my daughter's side for a year now. He makes her happy just being in the same room and would face down the devil himself to protect her. Honestly, if I could design the perfect boy for my daughter, it would be Harry with a haircut - ponytails are just so sixties." Dan had even more tears running down his cheeks by the time he'd finished, and in danger of succumbing to an emotional meltdown. He was saved from that fate by a kiss on the cheek from his wife.

"You write all that down and send it to Hermione, you know she'll let Harry read it anyway. I would leave out the bit about the hair though, Hermione and I both love it."

Dan was trying to wipe the tears away with his sleeve. "I know, but I don't want her thinking he's perfect. Can't have them getting big headed now, can we?" It was a weak attempt at humour, but it was at least an attempt.

He then asked Sirius a question Dan pretty much knew the answer to. "I suppose Harry spending Christmas again with us is out of the question? Having him and Padma in the house made last year our best Christmas ever." He knew Harry and Hermione would want to spend the holiday together. Not seeing Hermione at Christmas would be really hard to take, he didn't know how Emma would cope with that scenario.

"I would say that was a definite no, it will take more than a few months to work on Barchoke. At the moment, he wouldn't let Harry enter your house, never mind stay under your roof. You need to have both Harry and Hermione wanting to stay first, and that's not

going to be easy. This is going to be a slow painful process, and you need to remember something at all times. I made the mistake of treating Harry like a kid, he burned my arse and then threatened to go to Bill for advice. The cheeky bugger then asked me what my intentions were toward Henrica. He may be only twelve in years but he's been raised in an entirely different culture, sometimes he acts more mature than I do."

This found total agreement from Emma. "Sitting talking to Augusta at the Black Sea confirmed that. She couldn't believe the difference in Neville, and put it all down to his friends. They may be a group of four, but we all know who the leader of the group is."

"Yes, the baby-faced Ghengis Khan that I have to get down on my knees and apologise to."

Sirius had another worry, one that meeting Dan stopped him confirming. "I just hope they're okay together, this was actually the first time they've been apart since they met a year ago today."

This actually drew a weak smile from Emma. "I don't think you need worry about that, Sirius, I doubt you'll be able to slip a sheet of paper between them all the way to Scotland. Neither looked like letting the other go anytime soon."

-oOoOo-

They were still holding on to each other while they waited on their friends' reactions to their story.

"You're bonded, you actually blood-bonded?"

Hermione could only nod at her friend, worried about the disbelief in Padma's voice. Hermione needn't have worried. With a squeal of delight, she shot across the compartment and had both of them in a headlock while bouncing with joy. "Oh, I wish I could have seen it. Did you actually glow?"

"We watched the memory back, the silver glow shot up our arms. By the time it covered us, it had turned to gold."

This saw Padma stagger drunkenly backward to her seat, the disbelief was back in full force. "Gold?"

Neville just had to interrupt. "Okay, I should be getting used to not knowing everything around here. So, could you give a guy a break - I have no idea what you three are talking about."

"Neville, I know what it means to a goblin but Padma seems to have a different explanation here."

"I've heard what it used to mean, Harry, the more of your body that glowed - the stronger the bond. Figures you two would glow all over - but gold was supposed to be a myth."

Hermione was all over her now, here was knowledge to be learned - knowledge that concerned Harry and her. "Okay Padma, give! What do you know and where did you hear it?"

"Oh, that used to be the way people married, still do in some Indian provinces. It fell out of favour because everyone at the ceremony could see how well the couple were suited. Imagine a big wedding, hundreds of guests and then the bride and grooms hands barely glow."

Harry interrupted. "That's exactly why the goblins use it. We mate for life, you need to know that you are comparable. A goblin bonding where hands barely glowed would see the couple discussing if they wanted to formalise the bond. If their hands didn't heal at once, no bond was said to have existed."

"No, Harry, that's exactly my point. When marriages became more about arrangements and less about bonds, it became embarrassing when the ceremony clearly said these two people weren't suitable to be together. They wanted the arrangement more than the bond, so it fell by the wayside."

It was a still puzzled Neville who asked a question, an action he immediately regretted. "Did you two formalise your bond?"

Both Harry and Hermione were now wearing blushes that would stop a train. Padma decided to go for a third so mock whispered the piece of information Neville was missing. "A couple formalises their bond by having sex together after the ceremony, do you think they've formalised their bond yet?"

Neville easily now outshone his two friends as Padma burst into fits of laughter.

"Patil, you're lucky I don't have my sword..."

"It's in my trunk, Hermione, so don't let that stop you."

Padma was now squealing with laughter, she still took that laughter into the next compartment as Hermione fished out her sword. That girl could be scary.

Their fun was interrupted by Susan arriving with invitations for them. "I got handed mine, and they knew we were friends so I also got the job of passing these on. Who is this Professor Slughorn?"

Harry quickly scanned the scroll, and then made his mind up even quicker. "I have no idea, Susan. If he thinks I would even consider spending time with him, rather than Hermione, he's not nearly as smart as he thinks he is." Harry slid the compartment window back and posted the unwanted invitation straight out it. Before he could close it, there was a shout from Neville.

"Don't be so hasty, Harry, keep that window open so I can chuck mine out too."

Susan shrugged her shoulders and then did the same with her invitation. "I would rather spend the time with my friends."

The trolley lady then appeared and Harry got sweets for everyone. It was fun watching Colin, Luna and Ginny play the wizarding form of Russian Roulette, though with Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans - instead of a loaded revolver.

With a copy of Rita's book finding its way into many of the compartments, it was probably the quietest trip to Hogwarts in the history of the express. It was also easy to spot those compartments that had a copy, they would be jam-packed with students, with even more crowded around the door - listening as the occupants took turns at reading their precious copy out loud. That was until they would come to a revelation so shocking, they couldn't read anymore. The book would then be passed on to the person sitting next to them. By the time the express pulled into Hogsmead, Dumbledore's dirty laundry had been well and truly aired. Since Henrica had also turned

up at the castle with copies, the staff would also be well acquainted with the book too.

-oOoOo-

Albus thought he'd been prepared for the worst, turns out he wasn't even close. His father dying in Azkaban, after being sent there for attacking muggles. Ariana, Abe and even his brief relationship with Gellert - all were plastered across page after page of unmitigated horror. The horror though was unrelenting as it also told Tom Riddle's story, and the part he had played in it. From taking his Hogwarts letter to that orphanage, to teaching him for seven years.

The part that was a real dagger in his heart was where it told of Severus hearing the prophecy, and accurately described what happened next. The events of Halloween nineteen eighty one were depicted here more accurately than Albus had thought possible, all was laid bare as even more suspicion was heaped upon him.

He was the one who suggested the Fidelius, sent Hagrid to take baby Harry away, dropped him off on his relatives' doorstep and then did nothing to stop the boy's godfather being sent to Azkaban without a trial.

That horecruxes were then mentioned really chilled his blood. That the book admitted Harry had one under a scar the killing curse left, one that the goblins quickly removed, was more black marks against Albus Dumbledore. That he'd left the boy-who-lived on a muggle doorstep with a horecrux in his head was the conclusion every reader would reach.

The goblin nation also gave the real reason he found himself barred from Gringotts. That the goblins were openly stating they had spent the last ten years searching for these abominations, while he did nothing, just increased the depth of shit he was in.

What could be the final kicker though was, again in surprisingly accurate detail, a complete account of the entire Quirrell debacle. Albus was sure this book would finish him at both the ministry and the I.C.W. Whether he could hold onto Hogwarts was going to be very close. Ideally, he would come out fighting and refute most of the book. Unfortunately, like the company name suggested, every word of it was true.



-oOoOo-

Lucius was happier than he'd been in many months, it was almost too easy. They had all stood there, obviously waiting on someone. More importantly to Lucius, they had been totally oblivious to what was happening around them. He'd taken a massive risk, waiting until the first of September, but it had just paid off handsomely.

His mood changed the instant he spotted his wife's expression, what the hell had happened now?

She slapped a book into his hands, directing him to a certain chapter. Lucius felt the cold hand of fear grip his heart and almost stop it beating - the dark lord had created horcruxes.

Lucius remembered the feeling of pride when his master had handed over a most precious item for him to take care of, as well as his disappointment when discovering it was an old blank diary. His first scan though told him this item positively reeked of the darkest magic he'd ever seen, so Lucius had hid it away. Now, the very day he discovered it was probably a horcrux, the diary was in the possession of a carefully chosen victim and speeding toward Hogwarts. A Hogwarts that held his son and heir!

Lucius didn't know if he could survive being this poor the eighteen years it would take for a new Malfoy heir to reach seventeen, he was struggling to last the almost five it would take Draco to inherit. If his master returned when he was still poor, Lucius knew none of his family would survive past their first meeting. What had he done?

A/N Thanks for reading

A/N 2 I was going to hold this chapter until Monday, the day voting kicks off for our anti-knife crime video, but realised this was unfair. I know a lot of my readers look forward to receiving a new chapter at the weekend - so here it is. Our film, titled 'Hector's story', will hopefully appear on the Scottish Youth Parliament website (syp dot org dot uk) under the heading of their We-CTV campaign. I shall post a link on my profile page that leads directly to it once the video's are posted. I hope I can add 'thanks for voting' to my usual author's note.

## Chapter 37

The gang ensured the three new first years made it along to where the rest of their yearmates were gathered, waiting by the boats. The new second years then headed for the carriages, both couples in one, with Susan, Hannah, Parvati and Lavender in another.

Harry had been hoping his friend would bring the subject up but was eventually forced to ask. "Neville, how are your parents reacting to the treatment?"

Neville appeared rather embarrassed by the question but answered anyway. "The healers are saying it's too soon to say, and gran keeps telling me not to get my hopes up. The thing is, I think I can see a slight difference. They would normally just sit and stare in front of them, I swear I've seen both of them looking around the room - almost as if wondering where they are. When my mum slipped me her sweet wrapper, I'm sure she squeezed my hand. Gran promised to write but it's going to be hard waiting until Christmas to see them again."

Padma snuggled into his side, trying to offer some comfort.

Harry though had an idea. "What if you didn't have to wait until Christmas?"

This quickly perked Neville's interest so Harry laid out the idea he just had. "Hermione and I will be leaving the castle at Halloween again, what if you two come along. The four of us could visit both sets of parents."

All three could see Neville loved the idea of getting to see his mum and dad, Padma easily guessed what the problem was. "We won't expect too much, Neville, but we still want to meet them."

Hermione was now cuddling into Harry for a different reason, she needed the comfort of knowing he was there for her. Now they were back together, the multiple implications of the last ten days were beginning to sink in. "We won't be staying at my house this time, will we?"

He kissed her on the forehead before breaking the news he'd struggled to fit into their earlier conversations. "Your dad was waiting for me at the station."

Harry could feel Hermione's body stiffen at that news. "What did he want?"

"He just wanted a quick word, but you were waiting and I was late. I told him I was in a hurry, he wished me a good year at Hogwarts."

Hermione was digesting this when Neville made up his mind. "What if I write to gran and ask if we can all stay at my house?" He took the three wide smiles this idea generated as a yes. Having Harry beside him at their last visit to St Mungo's had actually helped Neville, he knew both girls were good friends. Neville was starting to think Padma might be more than a good friend but he would wait and see what this year brought before taking those thoughts any further.

-oOoOo-

Colin appeared disappointed to be sorted into Gryffindor, he went and sat beside Neville. Luna practically floated to the Ravenclaw table, gratefully accepting the position Hermione offered beside her. Ginny was the last first year to be sorted and stared wistfully at her blond friend as she joined her brothers at Gryffindor. There was a murmur of dissent as Dumbledore stood, it died as he basically just said tuck-in and the food arrived.

Padma was telling Morag, Lisa and Mandy about some of the things they'd done during their holiday when Hermione's hand shot to her bag. "Oh, how could I forget! Mum gave me some of the photographs to let you see, sorry but it went right out my head."

The photographs soon replaced the feast as the centre of attention at the Ravenclaw table. When Harry saw the pictures being circulated outside their circle of friends, it was time for a warning. "Guys, none of those photographs featuring the girls or Professor Hobson will be missing after you've seen them, especially the ones taken on various beaches." Harry didn't need to add - or else - one glance at how serious he was and everyone got the message.

Morag though had a cheeky question for the trio. "What about the ones featuring the male hunks, is it okay to sneak one of them into my bag?"

Padma and Hermione answered in stereo. "Hell no!"

The consensus at the Ravenclaw table was this group had 'stolen' the summer ball, even the Prophet had said so. While it had been such a major highlight in Britain, that same ball now looked like only a very small part of their summer adventure.

Roger though had a word of warning for the group. "Harry, Professor Slughorn is sitting up there and staring at you, he was really quite miffed you didn't respond to his invitation on the train."

"I did respond, we all threw them out the window." This got a few chuckles before he reassured every second year there. "We will still have Master Pitslay for potions, and there is no way I'll be going anywhere near Lockhart's class. Poncey git probably has the classroom walls plastered with pictures of himself. We will have Assistant Ambassador Weasley teaching us defence this year again."

This drew some cheers at the table, there was no one swooning over that peacock in Ravenclaw. Harry looked toward the staff table, picking out Henrica, one glance was enough to tell him that she would rather be sitting having dinner with them. She'd been a great help to Harry over the last ten days, even keeping his mind occupied by pumping him for information that would end up in her book. Next summer would complete her research and then she was planning on putting it all together. He was promised a signed copy for his help. Having stayed at Grimmauld for the last week or so, he suspected she might be signing it as Henrica Black by then.

When Dumbledore stood at the end of the feast to give his traditional welcome speech, the silence that descended in the hall was anything but respectful. No one was quite sure who moved first but Penny and Percy appeared to be the instigators. They started their houses moving to their dorms, with Hufflepuff and Slytherin quickly picking up that this was something they wanted to support.

Dumbledore's voice faded to silence as every student now had their back to him, making their way out the hall. The staff were also

following their students' example, they started leaving too. Within a few moments, the headmaster was the only person left in the hall. Albus was gripping the lectern tightly, trying to rein in his temper. He'd never been shown such disrespect in his entire life.

Minerva left the hall, knowing already who her top candidates for next year's head boy and girl were.

-oOoOo-

Harry had asked Helena at the feast if he might have a word with her later, the ghost appeared in his room that night and listened as her champion passed on the warning Dobby had delivered.

"Not much information for us to react to. In fact, no information at all. Terrible things could mean absolutely anything."

"I know. What about the wards, did they detect anything unusual?"

The Lady Ravenclaw couldn't hide her disgust. "The wards are a total mishmash. There is more effort put into making sure muggles can't see the castle than there is to protecting the school. Each headmaster adds their own contribution, leaving a patchwork quilt of meddling instead of the work of art that the founders originally set."

Harry was by no means an expert but he understood the basics of wards. "Even getting rid of Dumbledore and having goblins rebuild the wards might not help. If the threat was already inside the castle, a new ward scheme wouldn't do any good."

Helena promised to warn the other ghosts, portraits and elves to keep a sharper lookout.

-oOoOo-

It felt good to be running together again. Harry and Hermione were taking advantage of the good weather to follow the path around the Black Lake, they would be relegated to the room in Hogwarts soon enough. Having no one to fence with during their forced separation, Hermione was keen to cross blades again. Since they both now had armour, Harry agreed to using their actual swords.

They were practicing in the courtyard and Harry was delighted at the progress Hermione was making, holding her own in that very real duel had certainly done her confidence with a blade no harm at all.

They were eventually interrupted by their head of house. "I can see you've been practicing, Miss Granger. Then again, you have a very good teacher. The news from Gringotts pleased me greatly, can I assume you will be keeping that quiet for now?"

"Yes, Professor. Only our family and closest friends know. Hermione, we've got quite an audience."

They did indeed. Now that they had stopped fencing, Colin thought it would be safe enough to take a picture. It caught Hermione's surprise perfectly. There must have been fifty people watching the golden couple fence, quite a few of them had surprise expressions too. Even on holiday, both had kept up their exercising. Combined with their tan, and the clothes they wore for exercising, they cut a very unusual sight for witches and wizards.

"Are we running late? We usually finish before everyone gets up."

"It's the first day of term, Miss Granger, most students are up early today. That's actually why I came out here, to give you your timetables. You have potions first thing and Professor Slughorn is so looking forward to getting you in his class. I would hate for our new head of Slytherin to be disappointed."

Catching on at once what Master Flitwick was hinting at, Harry whipped out his knife and then used it to alter a coin sized disk on his knife holster that Hermione thought was for decoration. After moving a few symbols about, knife and sword were put away.

"We better get a move on, Hermione. We need to shower, change and have breakfast before Master Pitslay gets here. You know he hates to be kept waiting."

Hermione was too busy solving a puzzle to move right away. "Is that your emergency system for contacting your father?"

"Yeah, there was a good chance either defence or potions would be our first lesson. I just alerted him it was potions. There is no way I was going to Lockhart's class, Eargit or Moonlight could probably

beat him up. Master Pitslay can take a copy of our timetable back to Gringotts with him."

Their head of house was now laughing. "I don't think Professor Lockhart would let you anywhere near his class, centurion, he's terrified of you - and probably Hermione now too. I saw him watching you two fence as I came down here, his face matched the colour of his hideous robes, chartreuse I believe he called them."

Lockhart avoiding them was good news in their book, both quickly headed off to Ravenclaw for those much needed showers.

-oOoOo-

Padma and Luna were waiting by the time Hermione made it down to the common room.

"I'm hearing you and your boyfriend put on quite the show this morning? Talk of the castle, no less."

"Well, if you had gotten your lazy backside out of your bed, you wouldn't have to listen to hearsay."

Luna though had a question, "Why did you call Harry her boyfriend when you know they've bonded?"

Both girls now staring at Luna made her think she'd done something wrong. "I'm sorry, was it supposed to be a secret?"

She felt a hand settle gently on her shoulder and turned to see Harry smiling at her. "It's okay, Luna, you just surprised them. Can you tell us how you found out?"

"Oh, I can see it. I've always been able to see things others miss. I can see the bond between you, and also the one you share with your two best friends. There's no way you wouldn't have told them about the bond, that's why I was surprised when Padma called you Hermione's boyfriend. I can keep a secret, Harry, do you want me to?"

"Yes please, Luna. Hermione and I are very happy about it, but some others might not think the same. We'll be staying as boyfriend and girlfriend until we're a few years older."

"Ha, that will be when I'm thirty eight, if my father has his way!"

"Oh, was that who I saw talking to Sirius? He looked really discombobulated."

This drew looks from the other three so Luna explained. "My daddy used to always use the saying that someone didn't know their arse from their elbow, mummy didn't like me using daddy's expression so she taught me that great word. It means the same and, since mummy taught it to me, I use it every chance I get. I think daddy acts more and more discombobulated just to hear me say it."

Padma now had her arm around the girl, leading the little blonde in the direction of breakfast. "Luna, you're going to fit right in. These two are much too serious, you're exactly what they need."

Harry now had his arm around Hermione. "You okay?"

"I think so. Now we're back together the entire thing just seems like a bad dream. I've never fought with either of my parents before, nothing beyond a mild sulk, I don't know what to do next."

"Talk to Henrica, or Padma? I'm afraid neither Neville or I will be much use to you on that front."

They followed Padma and Luna out of Ravenclaw before Hermione told him what was really bothering her. "I know, Harry, and that's what really got to me. Neville was so excited at the mere suggestion his mother might have squeezed his hand, yet I haven't spoken to my dad since that night."

She had her head down in shame as she told him the next bit. "I actually attacked him with my practice sword. He was about to start on a 'you will talk to me' rant and I just exploded. Yes I was angry but he didn't deserve that. It's only since we got back together that I'm beginning to see both sides of this."

"If he was talking to Sirius, then at least there's hope. My father was angrier than I've ever seen him at the incident, we'll need to keep those two apart for a while. We've almost got Halloween planned, that just leaves us the Christmas holidays to worry about. I know one thing for sure, I'll be spending it with you - it's just the where we



need to sort out. I hope it will get better, now that everyone has had time to cool down."

Hermione took some comfort from that and they were smiling as they entered the Hall. The young couple were immediately approached by Fred and George. Both wanted to check their potions classes still matched, and that Master Pitslay would be teaching them again this year. They headed back to their own table, delighted the answer to both their questions was yes.

After enjoying their breakfast, the arrival of Master Pitslay revealed at least one lie Rita's book had missed. Perhaps if they'd gone with the Halloween publishing date it would have been included. With Snape falling into their hands, the final piece of the jigsaw revealed itself. They were also certain Dumbledore would have gotten suspicious if Barchoke had postponed their meeting again, and there was no way they wanted him anywhere near their horcrux program.

Slughorn exploded loudly at Dumbledore, watching the students as they rose to accompany Master Pitslay to their potions class. "Dumbledore, you promised me Lily's boy would be in my class. You told me it was only because he didn't like Snape that Harry arranged a private tutor. Henrica and Minerva both assured me Harry wouldn't be stopping his private tuition but I believed you - shows what a fool I am. All the top potions students in second year, and the two top fourth years are being taught by someone else - this is not what I signed on for..."

With today's Prophet full of excerpts from that blasted book, Albus really didn't need this now. "I'm sorry, Horace, my hands are tied. Harry clearly stated his reasons for not taking potions in front of everyone. I assumed that, since I had addressed that problem, he would take potions with you. I am not allowed to speak with the boy but will ask Minerva if she will intercede on your behalf. I fear I must point out though, the facility has always existed inside Hogwarts for students to hire personal tutors. I understand he won't be taking the defence course either."

Horace left to take his class, a class bereft of Ravenclaws and, more importantly, the Order of Merlin award winning boy-who-lived. The boy who was the only reason Horace Slughorn returned to the castle.

-oOoOo-

Roger flopped down at the table for lunch, the look of disgust on his face was hard to miss. "Well, that was an utter waste of a morning. One lesson and I already know Lockhart is the most useless defence professor we've ever had."

Harry was trying not to laugh, he really was. "How could you know that in one period?"

"He started off with a quiz, but every single question was about him. How the hell is knowing Gilderoy Lockhart's favourite colour going to help me pass a defence exam? I hardly think that's likely to appear on any O.W.L. exam paper. Then the ponce acted out a scene from his book. Funnily enough, not once did he take his wand out. Has anyone seen if he actually has one?"

They would have suspected Roger was having them on, if the rest of the fourth year Claws weren't wearing the exact same expression of disgust.

Luna's first lesson had been charms with her head of house, she thought the class was brilliant. Defence was now looking certain to be a disappointment. "Harry, when will you know about those extra lessons?"

"We've got history next, Luna, so I'll talk to Professor Hobson then. We already have extra lessons ourselves every weekend, and astronomy on a Thursday, so we'll need to look at one of the remaining evenings. I'll ask the professor which suits her best and let you know."

"Can anyone come to these lessons?"

"Roger, you can't be serious? You're fourth year now..."

"A fourth year who's had one bad defence professor after another. Reading books can only take you so far, Harry. How are we meant to pass a practical exam if no one ever teaches you that stuff. You had the person getting paid to teach us defence flat on his back just by grabbing his pinkie, I also saw the both of you fence this morning. I may be a fourth year but you or Hermione would certainly kick my arse in a duel. I want to learn, and anyone here older than me will

have suffered through the same shitty teachers I've had - only for longer. Penny raving about Percy's brother as a teacher is good enough for me. I don't want to wait until a month or so before my exams and hope McGonagall can coax him to come to Hogwarts for a few weekends - I'm perfectly happy taking pointers from his star pupils."

"You do know these two get up practically in the middle of the night, run for miles and then practice, practice, practice - every bloody day! Even on holiday, you get woken by these two going at each other with swords. That's why they're good, Roger, they work their arses off at it."

"Not helping, Padma." Hermione could see that, instead of discouraging anyone, Padma had unwittingly just given them a huge endorsement. It wasn't just Roger who was looking in their direction now, half the house appeared ready to sign up there and then.

Harry offered a partial solution. "I promised the first years I would help and we couldn't really run a mixed class at the moment, since the likes of Colin hasn't a clue about anything. Professor Flitwick has helped me with my training before, he's awesome with either a wand or a blade in his hand. Why don't you approach him with your concerns? He is our head of house, and a far better teacher than I'll ever be. If he knocks you back, we'll see if something can be worked out."

The relief washed over the table like a comforting wave. It was decided to wait until the weekend, just to give more of them the opportunity to confirm Lockhart was a shit teacher, and then a house delegation would approach Professor Flitwick with their concerns. If he said no, they always had an Order of Merlin winner waiting in the wings to fall back on.

-oOoOo-

Henrica was relieved to see Harry and Hermione had slipped directly back into the two lovely people that she was delighted to know. Henrica had practically to take her wand to Sirius, he was all for storming the Grangers and having it out with Dan. Pointing out that Barchoke was playing it smarter, and that they held all the cards, caused him to stop and think. Hermione couldn't be withdrawn from

Hogwarts without Barchoke's agreement, something that would never be forthcoming unless Hermione wanted it.

The idea that Dan would deliberately hurt these two was a non-starter, even a certain enraged goblin didn't think that was ever a possibility. That meant this mess may take some time to sort out, but that Harry and Hermione would be back together come the first of September. Now that everyone had a little time to cool off, she was hopeful some progress could be made. She genuinely liked Hermione's parents, and she considered Dan's actions to be really out of character for the man she'd come to know.

Seeing these two smiling again was well worth giving up one of her evenings, they decided a Tuesday fitted best. It would certainly be better than having Lockhart stare at her. She thought it was time to ensure he knew Harry was her employer, and just how protective he was of his employees. It was either that or let him see what a transformed veela was capable of, a fireball shot at his neither regions should certainly put an end to any amorous thoughts.

-oOoOo-

Gilderoy had figured his time in Hogwarts would be spent being fawned on by all the young witches, and associating with the only other wizard who was nearly as famous as him. The boy-who-lived had turned out to be a major disappointment, the goblin raised brat was practically a savage. Watching that girl of his battle against him with those deadly goblin swords had his delicate stomach almost in his mouth - he could certainly taste bile.

That there were very few young witches swooning around him was a bone of contention too. One of the main reasons for that deficit had just entered the great hall, and Gilderoy wasn't impressed.

Red hair drawn back in a ponytail, dragon tooth earring - with the same animal probably giving up its skin for that jacket and boots. This was no refined gentlemen, he was barely a step above being considered a scuff. To make matters worse, he was obviously on good terms with the boy-who-lived, and his friends. With second year defence classes twice a week, and their extra tuition at the weekends, this Weasley was going to be in the castle four days every week - this was far too often for Gilderoy's liking.

It was hard to miss all the female attention this scruff was attracting too, the attention that should have been heading in Gilderoy Lockhart's direction. Hogwarts wasn't all bad news though, Dumbledore had been summoned to the ministry and everyone knew he was finished. This could provide a golden opportunity to exploit.

It seems only a matter of time before Dumbledore would be booted out of the castle, and Gilderoy fancied a certain promotion as being a nice easy job for himself. His picture, posed while sitting behind the headmaster's desk at Hogwarts, would look grand on the back of his next book. He read about the troll incident last year, if only he'd been here then. A few memory charms and he could have gotten a book about saving the boy-who-lived from a rampaging beast, out for a taste of young human flesh.

He would have to keep his eyes open and see if there were any situations he could exploit this year, and work on his speech for the press. "After the fall of Dumbledore, the young witches and wizards of Britain need a figure they can trust and look up to - how could I resist a calling like that. My days of roaming the world and solving its problems may have to be put on hold, but nothing is more important than ensuring our youngsters grow into the fine young witches and wizards of tomorrow." - Gilderoy thought that should do as a starting point.

-oOoOo-

Albus had no defence so attacked, he attacked a group the old wizard was sure were responsible for all his troubles. He was using a tactic that had worked for him in the past, provide another target for people to vent their anger on. "Members of the Wizengamot, I have been dragged here before you to answer questions. What this chamber needs to consider though is whether it is the right questions that are being asked - or should I say the right person being asked them. For the last few days, wizarding Britain has been agog over a quite scandalous book. The questions that should be getting asked concern the author - a witch sacked from her post at the Prophet for blatant lies - and her backers. My own investigations have turned up some startling facts. What we have here is nothing more than a goblin backed plot to destabilise the Ministry of Magic!"

Albus felt euphoric at the mayhem that followed this statement. He actually thought that he might just pull this off, that was until his gaze fell upon the Bones bitch. She was far too calm, and that faint smirk was a dead giveaway. She obviously knew something Albus didn't.

Amelia stood and the chamber eventually grew silent, waiting to hear what she had to add to the debate. Like Barchoke, she thought Dumbledore guilty of multiple crimes - unfortunately, neither she nor the goblin had any tangible proof. Amelia decided she would need to settle for stripping Dumbledore of the one thing he really wanted, power. "Fellow members, over the years I have come to realise that is sometimes what Albus Dumbledore doesn't say that really matters. While I agree a certain book is scandalous, I certainly do not believe - nor has he claimed - it to be libellous. My own investigations have yet to uncover one lie in the entire publication."

A shout came from the chamber. "...but the goblins..."

"...have done us a huge favour. The only person here who thinks Albus Dumbledore getting booted out of the Wizengamot would destabilise the ministry is Albus Dumbledore. Personally, I think their investigations have done the ministry nothing but good. Crouch was clearly a criminal who has now paid for those deeds, this very chamber saw to that. I was actually one of a privileged few who was given a copy of this book well before it was released to the public. This was done purely to ensure the ministry would be prepared for any ramifications its publication might produce. Where Dumbledore sees plots, I see a nation friendly to the ministry - and going out of their way to protect that relationship."

Amelia stared down Dumbledore as she delivered the final nails into his political coffin. "As to the authenticity of Miss Skeeter's latest work, I can and will offer my personal opinion. Unlike some though, my opinion is formed from investigation. In forming my opinion, I interviewed Lord Black, Ambassador Barchoke, his son, Harry, Severus Snape..."

Albus was aghast at this. "You spoke to Severus? Where is he? How is he?"

"He was fine and content. I also spoke to your brother, though I doubt if that's the proper description for that particular event. Mentioning you and your late sister in the same sentence saw

Aberforth practically throw me out. He left me in no doubt though who he blamed for his sister Ariana's untimely death."

This saw Albus fall back into his seat as if he'd been physically struck. Abe had certainly never hidden that view from him, Albus had the crooked nose that reminded him of his brother's opinion every time he looked in a mirror. He'd refused to have it fixed for that very purpose. To hear that opinion broadcast to the entire Wizengamot was like a dagger through his heart.

Amelia then buried the dead body his political career had just become. "I again have to state that, in my personal and professional opinion, the book that started all this is factually accurate. My investigations could find not one untruth in the entire publication."

The voting to oust him was still ongoing when Albus rose from his chair and shuffled from the chamber, a defeated figure. The last thing he heard was a member nominating Amelia Bones for his recently vacated post.

It was hearing Amelia's nomination that saw Cornelius take his first action of the day. "While I applaud the member for nominating a very able candidate, can I ask this chamber to consider something no one seems willing to talk about. The dark lord who calls himself Voldemort is not gone, we now have this confirmed from multiple sources. We first heard this almost a year ago, unlike Dumbledore - we have not been idle. Under Madam Bones' leadership, our auror department has been quietly expanding to meet this perceived threat. I have no doubt Madam Bones would make a tremendous Chief Witch, or even Minister of Magic, I for one sleep better in my bed knowing she's head of the DMLE."

Cornelius received her backing on this matter immediately. "I thank the minister for his kind words and would ask that I remain in my current position until the death eater problem is finally behind us. Know this, our history will remember that Crouch, Bagnold and Dumbledore didn't deal with the problem when they had the chance. It is our intention that same history will look on Fudge, Bones and our new head of this chamber in a more positive light. I wouldn't want anyone walking into that position without knowing what is in front of us. It may be painful and even bloody, but we are determined to get the job done right this time."

Even those of a darker disposition were forced to join in with the standing ovation afforded the minister and his head of law enforcement for their brave stance on this matter. Some considered it foolhardy too - but today was neither the time nor place to express those views.

As Amelia had hoped, stating their aims upfront had immediately forced those who would oppose their views take a step back, leaving the way clear for a moderate to be elected to the post. Both she and Cornelius were pleased to see someone like Amos Diggory become Chief Warlock. They could work with him to reach their goals.

-oOoOo-

After running the quartet through their Saturday morning lesson, Bill was pleasantly surprised at how well they came through it. Padma and Neville especially were reaping the benefits from a summer spent traipsing around the world, swimming and playing physical games. Hermione also told him that a friend of Sirius' - and Harry's parents - had been giving them some defence lessons too.

Not having to hurry back to Gringotts, Bill was taking the opportunity to spend lunchtime with his younger siblings. Now that Ron wasn't under a probation order, he was keen to see his youngest brother didn't slip into his bad old ways. Bill was also desperate to discover how Ginny was getting on in the castle, he was delighted to hear she'd been somewhat 'adopted' into Harry's group. Ginny was certainly looking forward to Tuesday evening - and lessons from Harry.

This certainly earned a smile from her eldest brother. "The Gang of Four were running some stuff past me today, to see if I thought it was suitable - I think you'll enjoy your lesson, Ginny."

Bill certainly didn't enjoy seeing the re-emergence of 'Ron the prat'. "Bloody waste of time, if you ask me, Professor Lockhart knows his stuff. He had me help him with his demonstration, those four Slytherins were so jealous. The Professor obviously recognises real talent when he sees it."

The other four who'd also suffered Lockhart's 'lessons' were about to refute all Ron's claims when Bill held his hand up. "Just what was this demonstration, Ron?"



His excitement obvious, Ron couldn't wait to describe his moment in the sun. "Oh, the professor was using me to re-enact how he fought the Wagga Wagga Werewolf, from his book, Wandering with Werewolves. I was playing the part of the werewolf, I had to roar and everything. The professor had me in a headlock before casting the Hormone Charm, making me human again."

Bill had a simple question for Ron, "...and what did you learn?"

The question was so simple, it had Ron totally flummoxed. "What do you mean?"

"When you teach a class, Ron, it's important to have an objective for your students. That they learn a certain spell or technique during each lesson. So, what did you learn?"

"Eh, I dunno. I was in a headlock, how was I supposed to see what was going on?"

Percy was actually laughing at that. "I think Bill just proved his point rather well."

The twins then got in on the act too. "Hey Ron, werewolves don't roar..."

"No, they howl. You saw Harry put Lockhart down, does he look like someone who could get a werewolf in a headlock?"

Bill decided to put Ron out of his misery. "I also think you meant the fabled Homorphus Charm. It's rumoured to return a werewolf into human form, and be hideously difficult to cast - it certainly couldn't be done with a werewolf's head tucked into your armpit. Ignoring the fact that only the legend of this charm exists, and it's certainly well beyond the capabilities of any second year to cast, if Lockhart can cast it - I'd eat my boots."

Faced with this mountain of evidence against him, Ron reverted to his favourite tactic - ignore it. "Well, it's not as if I'm likely to meet a werewolf - is it?"

"Harry spent part of the summer with one..." The words were out before Ginny realised what she'd said. With all her brothers now

looking to her for more information, she obliged. "They were talking about it at breakfast this morning, turns out that's who taught Harry that grip. You know, the one that saw Lockhart on the floor. He thought Moony would have a great laugh when he heard about it..." Ginny stopped as her twin brothers shot out their chairs and headed straight for Sirius Black, who was having lunch with Professor Hobson and smiling in Harry's direction.

"Hey, Padfoot..."

"...you've been holding out on us!"

-oOoOo-

With Master Pitslay and Bill already having visited Hogwarts, Sirius had their assurances, along with Henrica's, that Harry and Hermione were fine. It took spending some time with them today though for Sirius to really relax - and now he had a promise to keep. Today's lesson had concentrated on politics - and how they affected the houses of Potter and Longbottom. With Hermione set to be Lady Potter one day, and Padma at least a contender for the Longbottom position, it was a lesson all four enjoyed. As the lesson finished, Sirius produced the letter.

"Hermione, your father asked me if I would deliver this. Before even considering to give you this letter, I demanded to know why he'd done something so out of character. I've since had a few long chats with both your parents..."

"My mum was never part of this, Sirius."

"I know, Hermione, just as you're smart enough to know any action you take will affect both of them. All I was going to ask was that you consider this before responding. Talk it over with your friends, Henrica and I are also here if you need us."

Padma had a hand on each of their shoulders now. "Stay here and read it together, we'll see you later."

As soon as they were alone, the room provided a sofa for both to sit on. It was with trembling hands Hermione opened the letter, she had to sit it on her lap to read because her hands were shaking so much. The young couple read it together.

My dearest darling daughter

This is by far and a way the most difficult letter I've ever had to write. I watched some memories that terrified the life out of me, and then I reacted very badly to them. My actions that night were inexcusable, and hurt the two most important people in the world to me - you and your mother. For that, I am truly, deeply sorry. I'm going to assume that Harry is reading this with you, and take this opportunity to apologise to him too - for all the hurt I've caused both him and his father.

When I watched the memory of you attacking Master Sharpshard earlier in the year, I saw you assume Harry was in danger and act without thinking. It would now appear this is a trait you inherited from me. I want you to know your actions that day pale into insignificance when placed next to my own colossal act of stupidity. I assumed a threat to my family and acted without thinking.

Had I that evening to live over again, I would have been there all night asking Barchoke question after question, and then welcomed Harry to the family like I should have done. Instead, my actions hurt a great many people - including some I was beginning to regard as extended family. I don't have that night to live over though - so all that is left is to admit how wrong I was and ask your forgiveness.

To you both I would like to say that it is certainly a long-held dream of mine to walk my daughter down the aisle on her wedding day. Knowing that Harry will now be the one waiting on my daughter at the other end of that aisle makes me happier than I can possibly say here.

I'm not naive enough to expect things to instantly go back to the way they were before, knowing respect and trust must be earned. I threw all of that away in one moment of panic and madness, I'm more than prepared to work at building those back up to a level that will allow us to once more be what I really, really want - a family!

Your loving father

Hermione was in tears by the end of the letter, Harry just held her close.

After a few moments she'd recovered enough to speak. "What do you think?" When Harry didn't answer right away, Hermione lifted her head to see the concern on his face. "Harry, I want to hear what you think - not what you think I want to hear. We need to be totally honest with each other here - this is probably the most important discussion we've ever had."

"I need you to be honest with me first, Hermione. Your dad mentioned that day you attacked Master Sharpshard. If you had that event to live over, what would you do differently?"

"Well, I would hope to put up a better showing..."

Harry almost smiled at that. "Are you saying that you would still attack?"

"There is no way I could stand there and watch, that's why I practice as hard."

This earned her a kiss before Harry continued. "That day those girls had you and Padma trapped in that bathroom, nothing would have stopped me rushing to you both. McGonagall gave me that detention, more because we both understood I would do exactly the same again. That's what worries me about this, what will he do the next time something happens? I couldn't let him take you again..."

A shudder passed through both of them at the mere thought of something like this happening again.

"In goblin culture, I am now your mate - and also responsible for you. Clearly this is something we need to discuss with your parents, ideally setting boundaries that we can all live with until we're older. Forcibly dragging us apart crossed way over any line that would be acceptable to me - and I hope you?"

Hermione could hardly disagree with that, she'd made her position pretty clear to her father since that night.

"The only reason neither my father nor I reacted that night was because he wasn't aware of a line's existence - something my father had intended to spend time discussing. We should have sat down like a family and discussed how we were going to move forward with this, now it will probably end up more of a business negotiation..."

Hermione reacted the only way she could to that remark, with shock and horror. "No, Harry, I will not have my parents treated like that. My mum and dad will be treated as family - or this goblin / magical / muggle relationship can't possibly work. I want my family back - my entire family. I've heard over and over how important family is to goblins, well, my mum and dad are now your family too. My father is as proud as any goblin, yet that letter has him practically grovelling - I feel sick inside for being the cause of that. You're forever quoting goblin culture to me, are you aware that it is customary in our culture to ask a girl's father for his daughter's hand in marriage? We went ahead and jumped right in to a blood bond - without consulting either set of parents. There were a lot of mistakes made that day, I don't think any of us were really blameless."

Harry couldn't look at Hermione as he asked the question he never thought would pass his lips. "Do you regret bonding with me?"

Hermione now lifted Harry's head before reassuring him with a kiss of her own. "You are mine, and I am yours. That is not going to change, Harry, but we are certainly both going to have to if we want to make this work."

He held her close and repeated the words that changed their lives forever. "You are mine, and I am yours. We've faced cultural differences before, Hermione, but I don't know how we're going to get past this one. In my heart, I am a goblin - the need to protect my mate is incredibly strong. The nation won't expect us to be married until of age - so that lets us set our own timetable."

"I see us as Head Boy and Girl, sharing that accommodation as husband and wife."

This had Harry's arms tightening around her, clearly showing his approval for that idea.

"My dad is not a bad man, Harry, he watched our bonding and just panicked. We can all learn from this, and stop anything like this happening again. I believe that - do you?"

"Of course I don't believe he's a bad man, far less a bad father. It's now clear to see how he could panic, I don't think any of us were thinking clearly that night."

"I have just spent a wonderful summer with what I now consider my extended family - mum, dad, your father, Sirius, Henrica, with Neville and Padma in there too somewhere. The locations were spectacular, but it was the company that made it so special. That is our family now, Harry, the family that it's apparently going to be up to us to put back together."

Harry's thoughts drifted to Emma's hug and then kissing them both goodbye at the station. The sensation of how warm and comforting that had made him feel inside swept through him once more, how could he even consider letting that go? He now understood Hermione's stance on this matter and was more than willing to stand beside her, Emma Granger was certainly someone you would fight to keep in your life. Emma though, wasn't the problem. "To get both of our fathers in the same room without at least a shouting match is going to take something really devious..."

Remembering Sirius' warning from earlier just hardened her resolve. Hermione had seen kids at her old primary school whose parents had divorced. They were passed around each parent in a business agreement drawn up by strangers, weekends and holidays became nothing more than allocated slots on a calendar. That wasn't going to happen in her family, her now extended family, not if she could help it. "...well then you'll just have to show me how devious your goblin side really is. If we have one argument, does that mean we're over?"

She felt Harry stiffen in terror beside her at that very thought, she drew him into a hug to comfort both of them. "Harry, the answer to that question will always be no bloody chance. We will argue, possibly even fight, we're both too stubborn not to! All I was meaning was we would get past it, just like we'll get past this."

They needed a few moments just holding each other, just to confirm they were still 'good'. Hermione had been right, this was their most serious conversation to date. When she summed up what they hoped to achieve though, it didn't seem impossible.

"We know what we need from this, and it's actually not that much. It shouldn't be too hard convincing our parents to agree to something that was practically their idea in the first place. We've been dealing with the differences between our cultures since we first met, I will not

see our family split by one mistake. We need to put our heads together and solve this. We both need my mum, dad and your father in our lives, we shouldn't settle for anything less."

Harry was admiring how expressive Hermione's eyes were when she got really passionate about something, they practically sparkled - and that was when the idea struck.

A/N thanks for reading - and hopefully voting

## Chapter 38

Both Grangers were nervously awaiting Sirius' arrival, neither could content themselves until they'd heard from Hogwarts. It was Sunday dinner time but there was no appetite for food in their Crawley home, it was information Emma and Dan hungered for. A pop from the back garden signalled an end to their waiting but cranked up the nervous tension in the house by about a factor of ten.

Emma was holding the door open, her first question being asked before Sirius even got a chance to enter the house. "What did they say? Have you got a letter?"

"I have no idea what they said, nor have I got a letter. We will need your memory player though."

Dan raced at once to get it, and then, for the first time in a couple of weeks, his daughter spoke to him.

"Hi mum, hi dad, this is not something we wanted to put in a letter - so Harry came up with this idea! I'm currently staring into a beautiful pair of green eyes and talking to you, strange or what? Then again, two dentists having a witch for a daughter is about as strange as you can get. With our family, there just is no definition of normal - something that got forgotten by all of us."

Emma already had a hanky out and Dan appeared close to tears too. Hermione and Harry had recorded this message last night so this was the first time Sirius was seeing it as well.

"A few weeks ago, a couple of incidents happened that have resulted in me standing here talking to you like this. In all honestly, I don't think any of us handled the situation too well. My father was simply desperate to protect me, he just panicked and made the wrong choice. I can see that now, before I was so focused on the hurt Harry must be feeling - I was simply blinkered to what was happening in my own home. Dad, for not explaining things, and especially for hitting you with my practice sword, I'm really, really sorry. I am ashamed of myself and hope you can forgive me, I have of course forgiven you."

Dan now needed a tissue from the box.



"Harry and I blood bonding seems to have caused most of the trouble. Mum, dad, I don't know what you've been told but Harry and I have had time to talk about it now. Here's what this bond means to us. Harry is my boyfriend, a boyfriend that will one day become my husband. The bond was our magic confirming that we could search the entire country and not find anyone more suitable, something we both were already coming to understand. We would only be legally married in the eyes of the nation if we confirmed the bond, not something Harry and I have any intention of doing for the foreseeable future. Shit, talk about strange! I'm standing here with my boyfriend, talking about sex so my parents can watch his memory of this conversation...told you normal doesn't apply to us anymore. Where was I, Harry? I knew I should have written this down..."

They saw Harry's hand stretch out and caress her cheek, the look of love their daughter gave him in return took Dan and Emma's breath away.

"Now, while not officially married, Harry and I are still considered family under the laws of his nation. This is something we're both very happy about, and hope the rest of our family will support. We don't want to be apart, but aren't even considering living together like a married couple - not until at least seventh year and I officially change my name. We're hoping the model that was used at the start of the summer can be our new normal."

Since the three people watching this were all being included in their future plans, none of them had any objections to this. After all, it had originally been them who suggested it.

"Harry already has a room at my home, I have a room at his and we both have rooms at Grimmauld. With us being at Hogwarts for most of the year, a mix of muggle, magical and goblin during any holidays has been a perfect fit for us so far. Neither Harry nor I want to choose one over the other two. For that to work though, we need our family - all our family. Mum, dad, Barchoke and yes, you too Sirius."

Sirius now understood them using this method, watching this was far more powerful than any letter. He also had a sphere in his pocket from Harry for his father. He was beginning to think these two might actually pull this off. After listening to the next part, Sirius was now sure they would.

"Now, these messages are really just to begin mending fences. What we really need is for our family to get together and talk, here's what we're suggesting. Padma and Neville are coming with us to visit Harry's parents on Halloween, Harry would like to introduce his whole family to his mum and dad. Sirius, could you tell Henrica and Remus they're invited too? The four of us are then going to visit Neville's parents, and Augusta has already invited us to spend the weekend with her. What happens after that is really up to you..."

Hermione's eyes were now filling with tears as she tried not to think of what could happen if their family fractured. "Dad, you said fathers had dreams for their daughters. Well, those daughters have dreams too, and I'm looking right at mine. You leading me up that aisle to a waiting Harry would be a dream come true for all of us - a dream worth fighting for..."

Dan was almost raising his arms as his daughter rushed towards them, it was different arms though that wrapped around the now crying young witch. The image was suddenly full of Hermione's hair as they heard her last words on the matter. "I don't know what else I can say, Harry."

They also heard more than saw a gentle kiss on Hermione's neck. "You said everything that needed to be said, Hermione."

The memory faded, leaving both Grangers needing a couple of moments to get themselves together.

"After dragging Hermione away from him, he still wants to introduce me to his parents!" Dan was having trouble believing he had been forgiven so easily.

Sirius was actually shaking his head in admiration. "Those two are clever in their own right, but together - they're simply brilliant! We all got a glimpse of what each is like when kept apart, that's not something I'm in a hurry to see again."

Both Grangers added their heartfelt agreement to Sirius' words, their daughter had merely functioned without Harry by her side. Seeing that sparkle of life back in her eyes got Hermione's message across like no letter ever could. Emma was drying her eyes, but this time it

was tears of joy. "We're going to get to see them at Halloween, and Barchoke too!"

This sobered Dan's euphoria. "Shit! Sirius, how do you apologise to a goblin?"

"Getting their son - and daughter - to pave the way for you will be a massive help. I have a memory message for him too. If anyone would know how to turn that goblin around, it would be Harry. I think that's why Hermione emphasised 'our family' so often. Harry will probably be taking the same line with his father, Barchoke knows that's the one thing his son wants - the one thing that he can't give him. He also couldn't miss the way those two boys looked to Emma all summer. Harry doesn't have a mother figure in his life, it doesn't take any stretch of imagination to see who he was promoting into that role - a role Emma here seemed more than happy to accept."

Emma couldn't help but smile at Sirius' last comment. "From the moment I met your godson, my maternal instincts just seemed to kick into overdrive. There is just something about Harry that has both Granger females wanting to hug him - and never let go. Knowing that he's going to officially become my son one day is the reason for these tears. I hugged and kissed both of them before chasing them onto the train, it just felt so right."

Both parents would watch that memory multiple times but Dan had already memorised the important parts. "Hermione is really only happy now when Harry's around, and I don't think Emma or I would have any problems supporting the two of them staying together the way she suggested at one of the three places mentioned. Had I known that's how this bond would affect them, I wouldn't have made such an arse of myself. Next time, I'll get Hermione to cast that locking legs thing and Emma can sit on me until I listen. Seeing them marry at seventeen is fine with me, it was doing it at twelve I couldn't handle."

Sirius could practically feel the energy flow back into this couple. He certainly hadn't enjoyed explaining the facts of life that govern muggle parents with a magical offspring to them, he still remembered Lily's reactions to learning that her parents' wishes counted for nothing in the magical world. Muggles were expected to put their children on to a train and basically then forget about them.

That might have worked centuries ago but it was something else now badly needing changed in their community.

He had to decline the dinner invitation, Sirius would need to visit Gringotts with Harry's message to his father. Last week, he would have thought getting their family back together any time soon wasn't even remotely possible. He was learning though that, when Harry and Hermione were involved, anything was possible.

-oOoOo-

Their timetable this year saw them begin their week with potions, Master Pitslay also started off Wednesday's too. With defence classes on a Tuesday and Friday, that left Thursday as the only day on the four second years' timetable that didn't have a goblin flavour to it - though Henrica was still in the castle if they needed her.

While expecting Master Pitslay, Sirius' arrival with their potions tutor had a certain young couple really worried. That was until they saw his wide smile.

"...and here was me thinking you two would be pleased to see me. Hermione, your mum and dad loved their little 'present'. They will see you both soon. Harry, as you said, your father wanted to watch his message in private."

"You wouldn't have understood a word of it anyway, Sirius. What brings you to the castle today?"

"Oh I need to make sure a certain History Professor now keeps that weekend free, and to stare darkly at that fool Lockhart. Henrica will fry his arse if he makes a move on her, though I would expect my godson to get a few blows in there too. I also knew you two would be waiting on news of how yesterday went, so I just rolled all those tasks up into one big bundle - and here I am! I also wanted to say your idea was marauder worthy, bloody brilliant. Need to go and catch Henrica before class, see you both on Saturday."

They may have headed for different destinations but Hermione, Harry and Sirius all had a definite spring in their step - especially for a Monday morning.

-oOoOo-

The four had hung back in defence, wanting a quick word with Bill about the lesson they would give to the first years after dinner. When the group of five eventually left the classroom, they could all hear the faint, plaintive cry for help.

Recognising the voice, Bill shot off down the corridor with the other four hot on his heels. Bursting into Lockhart's classroom, a scene of utter devastation greeted them. Ron was hanging from the iron chandelier, dangling a good ten feet off the ground. A group of Cornish pixies were meanwhile having a whale of a time, destroying everything they could get their hands on.

A wave of Bill's wand and the creatures were immobilised, it was now answers he wanted. "Ron, what the hell is going on here?"

"The pixies grabbed me by the ears and hung me up here."

Bill thought his brother had a tedious tendency to state the blindingly obvious so asked again. "Where is Professor Lockhart?"

"When the pixies took his wand, and chucked it out the window, he ran away while shouting for us to deal with it. The Slytherins were at the back of the class while I was sitting down the front, they made it out almost as quickly as Lockhart. The pixies were on me before I could get to the door."

Fighting with his temper at this so-called professor's incompetence, Bill asked one final question. "Surely he must have given you some instructions?"

The chandelier was still slowly swinging, taking its thoughtful passenger along with it as Ron harked back to what Lockhart had said. "We were warned not to scream, in case it provoked them. Lockhart then let the little buggers out their cage, all he said was 'let's see what you make of them!' When we all dived for cover, he tried to use a spell that sounded as if Fred and George had made it up. It didn't work any better than the rat colour changing one they gave me. After the pixies got his wand, they started pulling his hair. He ran out of here screaming like a girl. Bill, can you get me down now?"

A levitation charm soon had Ron free, and both his feet back on the ground. "Thanks Bill, Lockhart would have left me up there all night. Those Slytherins will have that story all over the castle by now, everyone will be laughing at me - again."

Help came from an unexpected source though, helping a fellow Gryffindor just seemed the right thing to do. "Just turn it back on them, Ron. Say you had the best view for watching Lockhart get beaten up by those pixies, and heard him scream like a little girl."

Ron's mind was quickly converting that idea to something where he deliberately let the pixies do that to him so he could watch - while the cowardly Slytherins ran away. "Thanks, Neville, that's a great idea. I did have the best view too!"

A now happy Ron raced away to tell his version of the story, it was also dinnertime.

Bill was making for the door that led to the defence professor's office when four students jumped in front of him. "Professor Weasley, this is not the way..."

Her boyfriend soon offered his backing. "While I would love to see you wipe the floor with Lockhart, Hermione's right. Dumbledore would use that to stop you teaching us, and there's no way we want that thing for our defence professor."

Padma just had to add her two knut's worth. "You can't beat him up, not without first giving us a chance to sell tickets. We could make a fortune just from the other professors."

"Professor Sprout wanted signed photos of Harry to hang in all her greenhouses. Lockhart was telling her how to do her job, until we turned up for class. He took one look at Harry and practically ran away, shouting some excuse over his shoulder." Neville couldn't help but smile as he described that event.

The enraged redhead was presented with another option by Harry. "You are now an Assistant Ambassador to the Nation, there are other ways to get revenge. Pointing Fred and George at the prat would certainly be where I would start."

This saw a smile creep onto Bill's features. "I suppose it is a matter of Weasley family honour. Giving the terrible twosome first crack certainly wouldn't do any harm."

This was greeted with mock horror from Padma. "Oh no, they'll want a share of the ticket money!"

The smile on their tutor's face was now predatory. "You're probably right, but they will make sure any audience gets their money's worth. As long as they save me a seat."

The pictures on the wall were all empty, leaving the group to suppose that the images displayed the same amount of courage as the subject - none.

-oOoOo-

Like the pied piper, Harry led the group of first years up to the seventh floor. Henrica was waiting on them, shaking her head as Hogwarts opened its special door. "No matter how many times I see you do that, it still amazes me - almost as much as the rooms we find behind it."

The first years appeared pretty amazed too, they were still agog when Henrica got things started. "Okay, everyone, gather round and listen carefully. I may be sponsoring this club but we all know it will be these four who will really be teaching you. I just want to set the ground rules before we start. Firstly, you will be getting taught defence in here, that means you have to obey your instructors at all times. As this class progresses, some of the things you will be getting taught could be very dangerous otherwise."

Henrica paused a moment to ensure that everyone understood that point before continuing. All those eager little faces staring back at her just reminded the veela why she loved teaching. "Secondly, anything you learn in this room will never be used on another student, outside of these four walls. Anyone found breaking these rules will no longer be allowed to attend. Breaking that second one will probably see you in trouble with Hogwarts too! Everyone understand the rules?"

A chorus of 'yes Professor' saw Henrica hand them over to the four who would be tutoring them. She stood back and watched the

quartet go to work. They quickly had the large group split into two, with each couple then taking their particular charges to the appropriate side of the room. She couldn't help but notice that each group was a pretty even mixture of sexes, and all four houses. It appeared a very deliberate attempt to promote integration.

She noticed Padma had taken the lead with their group, though Neville was right beside her and demonstrating exactly the points she was making. Henrica had also noticed these two had become much closer over the summer. Parts of their holiday in Tokyo was overwhelming for all of them, Henrica didn't think she was the only one who noticed these two would automatically reach for the other to draw comfort and reassurance.

Padma and Neville were taking on the task of teaching their group a spell, and then working with them to get the first years to cast it accurately. The room had created half a dozen shooting booths for this very purpose. Neville drew his wand and fired off the spell they would be learning, a coloured blob smacked straight into the target's centre. This earned him a round of applause, a joking kiss on the cheek from Padma plus a chocolate frog from the box they'd brought as a reward for marksmanship.

Colin asking if they got both rewards for hitting a bullseye, or if they could choose drew a laugh from Padma as the first six were moved into position to attempt the spell. Henrica couldn't help but admire the thinking behind this. It didn't matter how powerful a curse you could cast if it missed what you were aiming at, teaching accuracy right from the off would stand them in good stead for the rest of their time in Hogwarts.

Harry and Hermione were organising their group to practice the other side of the coin, evasion. Their part of the room had a terrain littered with boulders, broken pieces of wall and tree stumps - all perfect for little bodies to hide behind. As first years, they wouldn't be able to fight back or shield themselves for a while yet. Teaching them to get away from trouble was also something Henrica agreed with.

They were using two training dummies, set to fire the blob spell the other group was using. Since the blob disappeared in under five minutes, it would let them know who was tagged without leaving any permanent marks on their clothes. The dummies would wander



around, firing the spell at the hiding first years. Again they entered the course six at a time, with last person to be caught winning a chocolate frog.

The first years' not shooting or hiding were all busy calling encouragement or even warnings to those who were. As a teacher, Henrica could easily see that these four had put a lot of thought into this, she could detect Bill's input to their lesson plan too. The mere fact they had one put them miles ahead of Lockhart from the very beginning. That they had engaged their students, focused their attention on the task in hand and then even made it fun put them on a different planet from that faker.

Just watching their friends take part was also educational. Luna's tactic of keeping on the move and using all the cover the room provided was soon being universally adopted. It made more sense than the first winner's method, simply hiding behind something and hoping you were last to be hit. The cheering from the shooting booth was also becoming more frequent as their stock of chocolate frogs began to take a pounding.

She knew they had discussed swapping the groups over, halfway through the lesson, all four had listened to her opinion on the matter. Tonight was their first lesson so it was important not to push too much information at them. It also meant that those present knew exactly what was in store for them next week, and Henrica was sure their students would be looking forward to it.

By now, every group of six had at least four attempts at their activity. With the final rotations finishing off, it was time to sum things up. Henrica had an idea how to end the lesson on a real high.

"Right first year, you all did very well tonight. Next week will see you swap activities." This drew some excited cheering. "Now, would you like to see a small demonstration of why these skills are so important?" This drew shouts of yes from every single student.

Harry had his shield on his arm and was moving into the centre of the area they'd been using to teach the first year. Hermione, Padma and Neville drew their wands and took up positions around the area. Kicking off his shoes, Harry decided to give them a show. He also knew he would need the enhanced speed his armour offered if he was to avoid these three firing spells at him.

Henrica shouted 'begin' and some of the first years' forgot to breath. What they were watching though was pretty breathtaking. Harry was moving like lightning, he needed to though. The other three were all moving too, not allowing him to stay in cover for more than a few seconds. They continually attempted to trap him but Harry always seemed to be able to wriggle away, when Henrica called time, his shield was a mass of blobs but none had hit their intended target.

There was an explosion of loud cheering for all four of their now smiling tutors.

If there was a better way to end a first lesson than that, Henrica had yet to find it. "Right everyone, twenty minutes to curfew - so don't dawdle on the way back to your houses. Will we see you next week?"

This was greeted by loud cries of yes from every single first year. They were then approached by a delegation of Luna, Ginny and Colin. The three clearly spoke for the rest of their yearmates.

The little blonde went first. "We would like to thank you for doing this, we know you didn't really have to. We wanted to name our group so everyone would know how pleased we were to be here."

Ginny was battling her blushing as she said the next bit. "We looked up the name for a group of crows but didn't really want to be called 'Crow's Murderers' so we were stuck."

Colin barely let Ginny finish before jumping in with his bit. "Then yesterday, Luna heard Sirius use a word that seemed to fit perfectly. We would like to call ourselves Crow's Marauders!"

Henrica couldn't hold her laughter at Colin's suggestion. "Oh, Sirius and Remus are just going to love that - brilliant!"

Ginny then lost her battle with blushing as she removed something from her pocket. "Dean Thomas heard Colin and I talking about it, he drew this for us. I thought it was good and was wondering if we could get badges made, or something..."

Harry taking the parchment from Ginny saw her courage fail as she melted back into her friends. The drawing was very good, depicting

a crow, perched on the cross-guard of a sword - a sword that bore more than a passing familiarity to the one at his waist.

"Wow, Ginny, this is really good. I'll look into the club badges thing, if that's what everyone wants?" Harry was quickly reassured that's exactly what they wanted.

They were filing out the door as Henrica was congratulating them on a very successful lesson, they found Fred and George waiting on them.

"This looks like a conversation a professor shouldn't hear, I'll see you four tomorrow."

They walked in the direction of Gryffindor tower to drop Neville off, and listen to what the twins wanted.

"Guys, we need to talk to you about our prank deal..."

"We've devised a way to humiliate that useless arse Lockhart - but it might break our deal."

After hearing what the twins had planned, all four were in agreement that they would take their chances - the plan was just too good to pass up.

-oOoOo-

Eargit delivered a letter to Harry next morning. Hermione was absently sharing her bacon between both familiars while watching Harry, concerned as her boyfriend's brows furrowed at the letter he was reading.

She couldn't hold herself any longer and just had to ask. "Bad news?"

Harry turned to see Hermione biting her lip, he thought it was so cute. "Yeah, it would appear we've stabbed ourselves in the foot." With his girlfriend staring intently, he continued. "With a new history course and professor, Snape gone and Assistant Ambassador Weasley pushing up the defence O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. scores, Hogwarts has never had it so good. That hardly generates

momentum to get rid of its headmaster. Father says most appear to be keeping a close eye on the castle and adopting a 'wait and see' policy. Not what we wanted but at least the old wizard is now being watched - one more incident like last year and he'll be out the door."

Both Hermione and Padma shivered at the very thought of another troll, since they were also both aware of Dobby's warning. Hermione then asked about the news she really wanted to know about. "Did your father say anything else, about your message?"

"Oh, he's taking the points I raised under advisement."

Hermione was now stroking Moonlight with one hand while smoothing Eargit's feathers with the other. Both familiars seemed delighted at this arrangement but Harry could see the worry on her face. He reached out and gently stroked her cheek.

"Hermione, my father's a goblin. 'Under advisement' to him means he'll now be looking back at that night from every perspective, that was really all we asked for - all we could hope for."

This drew a smile from her. "I can't wait to read Henrica's book, I'll get my mum and dad a copy too..."

They didn't get to say anymore as Master Pitslay had arrived, it was time for potions.

Eargit flew off but Moonlight had another target, The little blonde was always good for a belly-rub - and perhaps a little more bacon?

-oOoOo-

The twins had confirmed after potions that they had put their plan into operation - even those two though were surprised at the speed the next phase was achieved. McGonagall stood that very lunchtime and announced those plans to the school.

"Some facts were brought to my attention earlier, and an idea that's just short of genius. George and Fred Weasley, fifty points to Gryffindor - each!"

This resulted in loud cheering from the lions, and disbelieving glances from the other three houses.

"Now, before I get accused of biased, let me tell you the rest. The exact date of Merlin's birthday is unknown, the best it can be tied down to is the last week of September. There are supposedly very few living holders of the Order of Merlin, three of whom are sitting having lunch with us today. After pointing out these facts, the Weasley twins then suggested we hold a ball in Merlin's honour - on Saturday, the twenty sixth of September."

This was greeted by loads of excitement from the hall, Harry knew this was his part.

Minerva spotted the boy standing and thought she might have overstepped the mark, she really should have spoke to Harry first. She didn't give Dumbledore a second glance.

"Something wrong, Centurion?"

"No Professor, I think the ball is a great idea. I just wanted to mention the fact that, if we are recognising the twenty sixth as Merlin's birthday, tradition dictates I must wear my award on that day. I wouldn't want people to get the wrong idea."

"Understandable, Centurion Crow. Perhaps Professor Hobson could cover some of the protocols involved in her history of magic lessons?"

Henrica quickly agreed, saying she would need a few days to check the appropriate texts.

Albus saw the obvious trap but, since he wasn't the intended prey, the headmaster decided to play along. He was hanging onto Hogwarts by his fingertips, here was a chance at some positive publicity. Anything that would see his name linked in a good light with Harry was something Albus couldn't really resist.

It was with some trepidation Albus stood, he didn't know if this would empty the hall again. "Like Centurion Crow, I also think this ball is a good idea. I hope you don't think I'm being presumptions either when I also have to wear my Order of Merlin." Albus then had an announcement to boost his own popularity. Well, it really couldn't be much lower at the moment.

"To help prepare for this unexpected ball, I think an extra Hogsmead weekend is in order. The nineteenth and twentieth should do." After the excitement this caused, Albus wisely decided to quit while he was ahead and sat back down.

Minerva thought that an extra Hogsmead visit was a good idea, but now she had the bad news to deliver. "When Hogwarts has held balls in the past, they have been restricted, with fourth year being the youngest students allowed to attend. Obviously, we're going to have some second years at this event. These restrictions are purely due to the size of the great hall.."

Harry had quickly consulted Helena, the looks of disappointment from those at the Ravenclaw table who wouldn't be eligible to attend forcing him to take action. "Professor McGonagall, if that's the only thing denying everyone attending, what if we could solve the accommodation problem?"

Catching on at once what Harry was alluding to, Minerva only needed confirmation this was actually possible. "Can Hogwarts manage that, Centurion?"

"Easily, Professor. When Hermione and I use it in the winter for our morning training, it provides us with a room containing a running track that is at least three times the size of the great hall. The Patil twins birthday party proved the elves have no problem finding it, Hogwarts will provide the facilities to accommodate the entire school."

"In that case, everyone's invited!" McGonagall's announcement saw a cheer reverberate around the hall, only Lockhart didn't look excited by this - he actually appeared horrified.

The second years had history of magic next, Harry kept chuckling all the way to Henrica's class. The only downside to this was he would again be a guest of honour, and have to sit with the other holders of the award. This was why Fred and George had warned him but Harry thought it was well worth the risk. Even if they were wrong, and Lockhart turned up wearing his supposed Order of Merlin, Harry would simply spend most of the evening on the dance floor with Hermione - hardly a hardship. It was Morag who finally asked him what was going on. Harry's answer set them all thinking.

"My award was put in its box after the ball, Dumbledore's is probably framed on his wall somewhere. Do you honestly think if Lockhart actually had an Order of Merlin, he wouldn't be walking about with it pinned to his frilly robes. Every book of his has the git's picture all over it, yet not one features him wearing his most prestigious award? Same with his stories, full of his deeds yet nowhere does it mention what he did to receive this award."

He could see everyone was now listening, even Malfoy and his cronies were paying attention. Harry then delivered the final blow. "The man just released an autobiography, *Magical Me!* It should probably have been called *mysterious me*, he still didn't say how he got an Order of Merlin."

Draco had been avoiding any kind of conflict but felt he was safe enough just asking a question. "Are you saying Lockhart lied about his Order of Merlin?"

"If you're asking for my opinion, then yes. Everyone will soon know if he turns up without it. The Prophet are sure to get hold of this story, and want pictures. The prat actually shoved Hermione away for a chance to get a picture with me, do you think he'll want to miss getting his picture taken as one of the three Order of Merlin winners at Hogwarts?"

Pansy now thought it safe to follow Draco's example, she certainly had no love for Lockhart but this seemed a tad excessive. "So all this is just a plot to embarrass Lockhart?"

They were nearly at Henrica's classroom but Harry answered anyway. "Embarrass, no. Prove he's a liar, yes. If he's lied about that, how many of his other claims are true?"

Morag felt the Slytherins had muscled in on her questions, they may have asked good questions but she felt there was something still missing. "Can't he just buy one, and won't there be records?"

Susan actually answered this. "An Order of Merlin is not just a piece of metal, its heavily charmed to bind with the person its awarded to. We could all touch Harry's award at the ball, but none of us could ever wear it - the magic involved simply wouldn't allow it. As to records, a big enough bribe to the right person could make those records say whatever you wanted."

Padma had a different theory. "I think it might be another case like Binns, someone says something often enough and it just gets accepted as being the truth. We'll all find out in a few weeks anyway."

Hermione had the last word on the matter, and this really was food for thought. "I can't believe how far the Weasley twins have come. This time last year, you could bet Lockhart would be sporting a pair of donkey ears and braying like an ass."

Padma just couldn't be outdone though. "Hermione, I thought he was an ass?"

-oOoOo-

It was still warm and dry enough to run outside, so that's where Harry and Hermione were next morning. Harry had to broach a rather delicate matter.

"Hermione, I've been thinking about your birthday..."

This caused her to actually stop running. "Harry, you totally spoiled me on my last birthday, and then again at Christmas. I don't need expensive presents, I've got everything I need standing right beside me."

This earned her a kiss from her boyfriend before they started running again. "What I intended to ask you was, if you wanted a big birthday party like Padma, or prefer just some close friends?"

They ran for a bit before Hermione answered, she was obviously weighing up the options before reaching a decision. She decided just to say those options out loud so Harry could help. "On the one hand, I really don't like being the centre of attention. It's different when I'm with you, I know no one's looking at me"

It was a rather exasperated Harry who answered that. "Did it never occur to you that might be because they know your boyfriend's the jealous type - the boyfriend who's never without his sword at his hip. I saw guys eyeing you up all summer, I made sure they knew you were with me."



This caused Hermione to stop again, and then throw herself at Harry in a hug so fierce that it almost saw his armour activate.

They began running again, Hermione had reached her decision. "So, just the holiday crowd then, and perhaps Luna, Colin and I suppose Ginny."

"What about letting the girls bring dates?" This got a puzzled look from Hermione until Harry explained. "I intend to spend the entire night with a certain birthday girl in my arms, that would leave Neville having to cope with both the Patil sisters, Susan and Hannah - Padma would just love us for that!"

Hermione quickly did the maths in her head, and didn't like the number she came up with. "That's thirteen, Harry. We don't need to invite bad luck, she usually turns up herself."

"How about inviting Henrica? Allowing her to bring a date would see Sirius there too, and having a couple of adults attend would probably square the party with McGonagall as well."

Decision made, they pushed on with their run. Both were looking forward to crossing blades after they were warmed up.

-oOoOo-

Lucius was way beyond warmed up, he was quickly getting to the exhausted stage. The little battered creature at his feet was very glad of that.

"What do you mean, you couldn't find it? I gave you very specific instructions..."

"Dobby followed master's instructions, I promise I did. I wasn't seen and didn't speak to anyone. I searched the entire room seven times, I even looked under the pillow when they were sleeping. There was no book there, Master. Dobby looked and looked."

This was something Lucius was not expecting, the diary could now be anywhere - even inside Slytherin house. An anonymous warning would be ignored, and anything implicating Lucius Malfoy would come with a one-way ticket to Azkaban included. Even warning Draco was a risk he couldn't take. His son couldn't be seen to be

implicated in any way with this matter, or the goblins would soon have Draco barred from the family vault.

His idea of revenge was turning into a nightmare, a nightmare that was now running out of control. Hogwarts would soon be visited by death and destruction, and they couldn't even afford to move their son to another school. It was changed days indeed for the Malfoy family.

A/N thanks for reading - and especially all those who took the time to vote. Voting closes on the 18th and I will post how we got on as soon as we hear.

## Chapter 39

Horace had tried to be subtle, it was something he was usually very good at - but subtlety clearly wasn't working in this case. His repeated attempts to get closer to the boy-who-lived had been rebuffed at every turn. With his friends always around him, and Harry not taking the normal potions class, his opportunities to get near the boy were being severely limited.

With this ball pending, and the three Order of Merlin winners being guests of honour, Horace didn't want anyone else getting their hooks into Harry - certainly not before him.

As his letters were being ignored, he was going to personally hand-deliver the next invitation. This course of action also presented its own problems - how and when to do it. Mealtimes were out, that could turn into too much of a spectacle.

Horace's choices were eventually whittled down, leaving interrupting one of Harry's classes as his best option. Which particular class was then an easy decision. Minerva, Filius or Pomona would all chase him if he attempted such a thing. The young history professor should provide no such obstacles in his quest to entrap what would be the star acquisition in his Slug Club.

"Excuse me, Professor Hobson, sorry to interrupt your lesson..." Horace's eyes were drawn, like the rest of the class, to the box held open in Henrica's hands. The history professor had a priceless teaching aid for her lesson, an Order of Merlin, First Class.

Henrica had been loaned Harry's award to demonstrate exactly what the Order of Merlin actually looked like. It took a couple of days to research the material but, since Monday, all her classes had learned the facts and protocol behind this most prestigious award. Sirius had practically fallen over with laughter when he'd heard what they were up to - accepting the invitation to Hermione's birthday party on the understanding that he would be invited to the ball too.

The history professor hid her shudder well, as 'call me Sluggy' entered her class. There was something about this man that just made her skin crawl. She'd grown accustomed to males eyeing her up and down, almost exclusively as an object of sexual desire. With Sluggy, it felt as if he was calculating how much he could charge

others for renting out her sexual favours - once he owned her. Henrica had never met anyone with a more appropriate nickname - Horace Slughorn was one slimy bastard.

None of this showed on her beautiful face as she contrived a weak smile for her Hogwarts colleague. "How can I help you, Professor Slughorn?"

"Oh my, that's spectacular!" His eyes glued to Harry's award, Horace was now more determined than ever to add the boy-who-lived to his exclusive club. "Sorry to disturb you, Professor Hobson, but I seem to have a slight communications problem. Every owl I send to Harry here seems to go astray, so I thought I would deliver these invitations myself. I know how disappointing it can be for second years to watch those merely a year above them heading off to Hogsmeade, so near and yet so far, that is why I have organised one of my little intimate soirées for Saturday night. I have invitations here for Miss Bones, Mr Longbottom and Harry."

Horace held his invitation out to Harry, only to be greeted with a steely glare. "It's Centurion Crow, and the answer is no."

A flustered Horace could only splutter a 'what?' In reply, Harry then spelt it out for the Head of Slytherin.

"It is no secret Professor Hobson spent part of the summer holidaying with my family, yet she still refers to me in class as Centurion Crow. On the other hand, we have never met, far less been introduced. By what right do you refer to me as Harry?"

Slughorn tried to steer the conversation onto calmer waters, having no idea this was as calm as it would get. "My apologies, Centurion, no insult was intended. I hope this didn't influence your decision and we can start again. Let's use this party as the first step to getting to know one another."

"Apology accepted, I still have a previous engagement though."

"Oh come now, what else is there to do inside Hogwarts on a Saturday night?" Horace was then faced with the unusual sight of the entire class laughing at him.

Neville was next to speak up. "I too have a previous engagement, Professor. I have no intention of missing Hermione's birthday party."

Thinking of how he could still swing this deal around, Horace referred to the invitation that was still clutched in his hand. "These invitations are for you and a partner, I had of course assumed Miss Granger would be a guest too. That will be a perfect way to celebrate her birthday." Again this was met with laughter, even members of his own house were laughing at him now.

Susan was next to decline. "I too have a previous engagement. I was lucky enough to receive an invitation to Hermione's party, and have no intention of missing it - Harry throws the best parties."

This was greeted with total agreement - some of it grudgingly given to be sure. That was more to do with those not receiving an invitation to the latest one, rather than in any way disputing Susan's statement.

Horace was a trier though, it took a lot to dissuade him once he'd set his mind to something. "Ah, then you'll need staff supervision. I of course offer my services..."

He was cut off immediately by Harry. "That won't be necessary, Professor Hobson has already agreed to fulfil that role."

"But surely you will need a male adult there too?"

That avenue was also swiftly closed off. "Lord Black has kindly agreed to give up his Saturday night to be here in the castle. These arrangements have already been agreed with our head of house and Professor McGonagall."

Horace still had Harry's invitation in his hand but was left clutching at straws. "Very well, I would still like to attend though. Surely that is possible?"

It was Hermione who finally lost it at this point. "First, you want to invite us to your party, now you want to gatecrash mine? No! In a muggle school, a professor inviting children to a 'little intimate soirée' would see the police - their aurors - involved. Who chaperones at your parties, Professor?"

It was an enraged Horace Slughorn who took a step toward Hermione. "How dare you..."

Just as Dan Granger had predicted to his wife and Sirius in that cafe, a threat to Hermione and Centurion Crow showed up. He was firmly between his bonded and Slughorn, it was time to lose the niceties Sirius had been teaching them. Sometimes, Harry just had to let his inner goblin out to play.

"Miss Granger is a friend of the goblin nation, and under my personal protection. Any threat, verbal or otherwise, will be met with a goblin response."

"Are you threatening me, boy? I'll have you expelled!"

"Not threatening, Professor, just passing on a warning. I am a Centurion first, and a Hogwarts student second. You need to understand that fact. Screeching abuse at a goblin female will see you lose your head, literally. No goblin would ever stand back and allow that to happen. I have now explained the situation to you, I trust it won't happen again?"

Harry then turned his back on Slughorn to talk with Hermione. "We have people like that in goblin society too, they eke out a living by putting one contact in touch with another contact. They don't actually contribute anything to our society, they've just found a nice, comfortable, niche for themselves. We call them leeches, rather appropriate name in this case - don't you think." His wink almost had Hermione laughing before Harry turned around to face a stunned Slughorn again.

"This is the part where you tell me how impressive your list of contacts is, and how much they could help me. Can I just point out my father is an Ambassador, Lord Black is my godfather, I am heir to the most Ancient and Noble House of Potter and that's my Order of Merlin, First Class, in Professor Hobson's hands. Add to that I holidayed this summer with the Bones', Longbottoms and Patils - now tell me what your contacts can do for me?"

The class were stunned, having never seen Harry act like this before. It was reminiscent of the most arrogant of purebloods, he wasn't finished though. "Tell me, Professor, do you count Tom Riddle among those contacts?"

This drew gasps from the other students, and saw a shocked Slughorn take a step back. Harry's attitude now began to make sense, and he still wasn't finished. "I'll bet Riddle was in your 'Slug Club'? You were his head of house, you made him prefect - and then head boy. Did you use your contacts to help Riddle after he left Hogwarts?"

Slughorn couldn't have gotten any paler if a plague of leeches had attached themselves to his bloated body, blows were being delivered here that his ego might never recover from.

"You should have worked out by now that my friends and I have been avoiding you, now you know why. Stay away from me and my friends, we have no intention of becoming part of Sluggo's collection of misfits and death eaters."

That Slughorn was receiving hostile stares, even from his own house members, rang the death knell for a resurrected 'Slug Club'. He couldn't give invitations away to the starving after Harry's tirade. Horace though wasn't about to stand here and take that, not from a second year.

"Who are you to accuse me, boy? You think brandishing a name makes you brave? You have no idea of the power the dark lord wields, or the consequences we'll all face when he returns..."

Horace decided to say no more, the sword now pointing in his direction certainly played some part in reaching that decision. He was honest enough to admit the sword was not the major reason for his silence, looking into those green eyes was a lot more frightening. He'd often heard that Harry had his mother's eyes, Horace would now refute that. They may be the same colour and shape, but that was all. These contained a fierceness and ruthless determination Horace had rarely witnessed before, and certainly never in one so young.

"This sword is the consequences your dark lord will face when he returns, it won't be alone. My sword will be backed by every blade Gringotts can muster, and every wand the ministry has to hand. Voldemort had way less than a hundred followers last time, yet people like you cowered in fear and almost let him win. Sealing a house in the middle of the night, as decent people slept in their beds,

before burning everything to the ground is nothing more than the work of rabid animals. These animals will be rounded up and dealt with, just how many of those animals will be current or former slugs?"

As if to emphasise Harry wouldn't be alone, Hermione had her blade drawn and wands were finding their way into hands all around the classroom. No one felt Harry needed help with Slughorn, this was purely a gesture of support. As well as Henrica, there were also Slytherins with their wands now drawn.

Horace was just glad none of those wands were pointing at him, the glare from a sword-wielding boy-who-lived was more than enough to put him off his crystallised pineapple.

"You are standing there now, no doubt with information that would help us win this fight. Will you go and speak with Amelia Bones about this? I really don't think so. Even by your inactions, you have chosen your side - and everyone in this classroom can see it. By all means, use your fabled contacts to pass the word - tell them this from me. There is no more middle ground, this coming fight will affect all of us. You have already chosen your path, and it's a path that disgusts me. How Dumbledore thinks your fit to lead a house is just one more crime to lay at the Headmaster's door."

It was a livid head of Slytherin who scuttled out the room. To his credit, Sluggy managed not to leave a trail of liquid behind him.

-oOoOo-

They were just finishing off their dinner when their head of house approached the Ravenclaw table.

"Centurion, I have been asked to accompany you to a meeting with the headmaster."

This left Harry puzzled. "Master Flitwick, you know that can't happen without my father present?"

"I informed the headmaster of this, he said the issue was so serious it couldn't wait. The claim is you threatened Professor Slughorn with your sword..."



The second year Ravenclaws responded en masse to that allegation, Filius didn't need to be head of the house of the smart to understand they were collectively rubbishing that allegation.

"I've been advised that, should you decide not to accompany me, the headmaster would have no other option but to take Professor Slughorn's word. That would lead to the cancelling of Miss Granger's party on Saturday night."

Hermione was first to react. "No, Harry, I will not be used by Dumbledore to force you into anything. Sorry guys, the party is now cancelled."

This drew groans from those who were invited but Hermione wouldn't be budged. She held her mate's hand to emphasise her point. "We both know Dumbledore is trying to provoke a reaction here, let's not give him one. As long as I get to spend my birthday with you, I'll be happy."

Harry spotted the Ravenclaw ghost and asked her advice. "My Lady Ravenclaw, can the headmaster do this?"

Her answer was not what Harry hoped to hear. "In matters of indiscipline, the heads of house and headmaster have a wide range of options open to them. This party is clearly something you want, withholding it is therefore an appropriate form of punishment."

Padma was furious, seeing her friends get punished like this. "...but my Lady, surely if the punishment is unjust?"

"The headmaster has finally wised-up." This drew all the attention onto Harry, waiting on an explanation to his statement. "Dumbledore probably knows these allegations are nothing more than a pile of dragon dung, he's punishing Hermione while smugly sitting back - waiting to see what I'll do. If I rush to his office, proclaiming my innocence, he wins a small victory. If I contact my father and allow him to deal with it, again I appear weak. Accepting the punishment still works for him, because he gets some payback for all the trouble I've caused him."

He felt Hermione squeeze his hand before speaking proudly to him. "Those lessons with Sirius are really paying off."

Harry looked to Hermione before answering their head of house. "Master Flitwick, I won't be accompanying you to the headmaster's office. He knows that option is not available without my father present, or is old age affecting his mental health?"

Filius supposed he really shouldn't have been surprised that these two quickly spotted the trap Dumbledore had set. "I'll tell him, Centurion."

"You may also tell him this will not go unanswered. Using Hermione's birthday as a lever to get to me is about what we've come to expect from Dumbledore. It makes me wonder why I actually come here. Potions, defence and history are all organised by my father - and I'm teaching Professor McGonagall our method of transfiguration. No offence intended, Master Flitwick, but charms, herbology and astronomy can be tutored too - and I wouldn't have to put up with Dumbledore, Slughorn or Lockhart."

Filius left to deliver Harry's answer, knowing how much this must be hurting. He'd tried to explain to Dumbledore that, since goblins don't celebrate Christmas or any other holidays like that, a person's birthday was the most important day of the year. Knowing that this was Hermione's first birthday as Harry's mate made this an extra special occasion - not that he told the headmaster that last piece of news. Dumbledore had been supremely confident the threat to Hermione's party would quickly see Harry comply with whatever scheme he'd conjured up - Hermione had instantly taken that option away by declaring the party canceled.

The head of Ravenclaw didn't think Harry's threat to leave was an idle one either. To Harry, not being able to celebrate his mate's birthday would seem too high a price to pay for what the castle had to offer. Filius' main worry though was how many others he would take with him, and whether Hogwarts could survive the public outcry his leaving would generate - Dumbledore certainly wouldn't survive as headmaster. Knowing that fact just might be the thing that would finally tip Harry's hand - he may consider that a price worth paying to leave the castle.

Back at the now shocked Ravenclaw table, it was Padma who asked the question that a lot of people wanted to know the answer to. "Would you really leave Hogwarts, Harry?"

He could see the looks of disbelief from all around the table, a table that contained more than Ravenclaws as his friends had rallied round. He tried to explain his position. "Last year was the first time I ever celebrated Christmas, something I plan to do again this year. To a goblin, someone's birthday is the most important day of the year. What would you do if Dumbledore just announced that Christmas was canceled - made into just another day? You were in that class, that smarmy slug has been chasing after me since the express - am I just supposed to play along? I hate my fame, and am certainly not going to play along with anyone else trying to use it for their benefit."

It was a very nervous Padma who asked the next bit. "What about the rest of us?"

"My main reason for attending Hogwarts in the first place was to see if I could make some friends, I happen to think I've made some very good ones. Whatever I do, whether it's tutoring or another school, any of my friends who want to join me will be more than welcome."

"What about me?"

The quivering voice sounded as if its owner was close to tears, it was also so faint that Harry wasn't sure if he was supposed to hear it. A miserable Luna was not something Harry would ever tolerate - not when he could easily fix it.

"You weren't listening, Luna, I said those friends who want to join me will be more than welcome."

As the implications of what Harry said slowly dawned on Luna, her smile was like the rising sun - it just got brighter and brighter. Watching this, Harry felt he knew how to brighten up a few more of their friends. All were disappointed that the party was cancelled.

"I was keeping this as a surprise for Saturday, but now seems a good time to let you know. The third through to seventh years will all be able to hit Hogsmeade this weekend, most will be making preparations for the ball while we'll need to attend in what we brought to Hogwarts. I didn't think this was very fair so, as part of Hermione's birthday celebrations, there will be a squad of Gringotts tailors in the castle on Saturday morning. They will be bringing loads of suits and dresses in the style we wore to the summer ball, and

they are exclusively for those who can't leave the castle. Namely, the first and second years. I would advise you to get down early as they will be working on a first come basis. They will have clothes for everyone, you may not get exactly what you want though if someone picks it first."

Morag was not alone in almost hyperventilating at that thought, she did though manage to express her thanks. "Harry, that's fantastic! I'll gladly wear anything they bring, but you didn't leave us much time to send home for the gold to buy them."

"Probably because you won't need gold, it's part of my gift to Hermione. For us to attend the ball dressed differently would make us stand out from the rest of you, not something we would intentionally do. At the same time, why should we let some of the older students attend the ball dressed finer than us. The solution was simple."

Even the smart Ravenclaws were struggling to understand this, Mandy needed confirmation. "So, your buying us dresses as a birthday present for Hermione?"

"Yes, so Hermione can wear the new dress I got her to the ball..."

"Harry, you got me a new dress? I still have the one from summer..."

"...which has been all over the Prophet. Can't have people thinking I can't buy my girlfriend a new dress." This was said with such a smile that everyone understood the Prophet had nothing to do with it. Harry just wanted to buy Hermione a new dress - one that would probably see her become the belle of the ball - and was prepared to kit out everyone else in a similar fashion so she could wear it.

"Oh Padma, Parvati, Susan and Hannah, there are new dresses with your name on them too - Neville didn't get one though." This got a laugh from all of them as news of this quickly spread to all four houses.

-oOoOo-

Albus was waiting with Horace in his office, getting Harry to apologise to the head of Slytherin would be a good start. It would get Horace off his back and teach Harry a little humility, something the

boy was sadly lacking in. It was a good job he was sitting down though as Filius entered the office alone.

"Filius, where is Harry?"

"Sitting chatting with his friends." The little professor refused to say another word, Filius was really angry with Albus and had no intention of making this easy.

Albus was struggling to believe the lad wouldn't rush up here. Harry had raced to the infirmary that night on the merest chance Miss Granger could be in danger. How could he possibly be still sitting with his friends? "Did you pass on my message?"

"Yes." The silence drew as Filius refused to say any more. If Albus wanted to treat him as a message boy, he would act like one.

"What was his response?"

"I believe he is currently debating with his friends why he bothers attending Hogwarts. Most of his classes are already tutored and he wouldn't need to endure two professors who want to use his fame - and a headmaster determined to assert control over his life. Personally, I can see his point."

Albus was so shocked at his miscalculation, he didn't even notice Minerva and Henrica entering his office. "...and Miss Granger's birthday party?"

"Oh, she saw right through you. Miss Granger refused to let it be a lever for you to control her boyfriend, she cancelled the party immediately."

Horace then totally misread the situation. "Well, if he apologises - my offer for Saturday night still stands."

Henrica exploded at that. "Dumbledore, where did you get this slimy bastard? He comes into my class, causes a rumpus and then goes running off to you with a story of big bad second years beating him up. Harry verbally destroyed this smarmy git, and his sluggish club. He was prepared to back those views up physically after this buffoon started shouting at Hermione. Slughorn's reputation is now shit even amongst the Slytherins, yet that's who you chose to back - instead

of even talking to me. It was my class, it should be me you are summoning - not a student you are forbidden from speaking with."

"Kindly remember who you are speaking too, Professor Hobson..."

"...and you would do well to remember that I don't work for Albus Dumbledore - I would never have taken the job otherwise. If Harry is seriously considering leaving Hogwarts, you can bet he'll take his friends with him. I honestly don't know if the school could survive the publicity of that, I know you couldn't."

"No one will be going anywhere. Once Harry calms down and comes to his senses..."

This time it was Minerva who got ripped into the headmaster. "Harry was sitting laughing with his friends, there is no calming down for him to do. Judging by the amount of excitement being generated down their, I would guess Harry just announced his surprise. His father wrote to me requesting permission, I of course said yes."

The headmaster made no attempt to hide the sarcasm in his question. "Since I am the headmaster, don't you think I should be aware of this surprise?"

"Well, since you've left me to run the school for years, that would be a no. Harry has arranged for goblin tailors to come here Saturday morning, providing dresses and suits..."

"NO! I will not allow such a thing. Promoting goblin wares, while denying trade to the village of Hogsmeade cannot be allowed. I'm surprised at you, Minerva."

There was no way McGonagall was going to stand for that. "Perhaps if you would shut up and let me finish, you wouldn't be. These tailors are here specifically for all the first and second years - students not allowed to attend Hogsmeade. This is a service Centurion Crow is providing free of charge, all bills are being met by him."

The greed expressed in Slughorn's face was visible to all in the headmaster's office. "He's paying for new clothes for the entire two years' worth of students?"

Minerva didn't really try to hide the disgust she felt for Horace when answering him. "Yes, for some of these children, these will be the finest clothes they've ever owned. They will also attend their first ball, dressed as well as their peers - was I supposed to say no to an offer like that? On behalf of Hogwarts, I graciously accepted Barchoke's offer - and offered him our gratitude in return for making such a gesture. You thank him by forcing Miss Granger's party to be cancelled!"

Horace felt his situation was being ignored. "You can't have hoodlums threatening their professors with swords..."

An angry veela cut him off before any more could be said. "Point number one, Slughorn, you are not one of his professors and had no reason - other than your own personal gain - for approaching Harry in my class. Point number two, Harry never threatened you with his sword - which destroys your entire reason for running off to Dumbledore in the first place."

If looks could kill, Henrica would have been vaporised by the glare Horace was directing at her, the veela was unconcerned as she told the true story of what had happened in her class earlier. "Professor Slughorn here was loudly proclaiming the fate that would await us all when his friend, Voldemort, returned. Harry drew his sword to demonstrate exactly what was waiting on Voldemort should he return - at no point was Harry's blade anywhere near Sluggy. Was this the story you heard, headmaster?"

Albus now had his head in his hands, wondering how things had went so wrong - again. He understood that the game was over the instant Miss Granger had canceled her own party. With no leverage, Harry was always going to refuse his request. Now, he was in an even worst position, one that it was probably impossible for him to recover from. There was no way he could reinstate the party, any remaining credibility would be instantly destroyed - Albus might as well resign here and now.

He needed some leverage on Harry, anything at all he could use - and time was running out. There was no doubt there would be a full report on its way to the boy's father, Hobson would see to that. Amelia and Augusta would also be receiving full reports, only their sources would be different - both their charges were actually in the class.

"I suppose we should be grateful he hasn't withdrawn from next week's ball..."

Again Minerva cut off her boss. "He may not have withdrawn but already asked for a set of conditions. He won't sit near you or Lockhart, and refuses to be photographed with either of you - and that was before your latest escapade."

Henrica then added to their misery. "You both will also have his godfather to deal with when he comes here on Saturday. Sirius will not be pleased that a party he was invited to was forced to be canceled - you can expect an irate Lord Black to make his opinion known."

Filius followed both witches out the headmaster's office, leaving Horace to ask Dumbledore if he was still going to punish Harry.

"Horace, cancelling the party is punishment enough, especially since it's now emerging all the boy did was refuse your clumsy approach. Trust me, Horace, you don't want to push this any further. Sirius will be livid and Harry's father isn't exactly the forgiving type. My advice would be to stay well away from Harry, and even further from Miss Granger. Approach her again and you just might get a closer look at Gryffindor's famous sword."

It was a very disgruntled Horace who left the headmaster's office, he hadn't gotten one single thing he wanted. Albus hadn't either, but he was slowly getting used to that outcome when dealing with the boy-who-lived.

-oOoOo-

The birthday girl made her way down the stairs to the common room, finding herself engulfed in a pair of oh so familiar arms. Hermione made a startling discovery, getting kissed as a teenager was so much better as her boyfriend delivered her birthday kiss.

Harry was nuzzling into Hermione's hair as he wished her a happy birthday. "We may not be able to have a party, but I'm still hoping to make your day special."



Hermione was in Harry's arms so gave the only answer she could.  
"Harry, it's already special - you don't need to do any more."

"I know, but I want to. We better set off for our run, I have plans for the rest of the day."

"Harry, you know I don't like surprises..."

"Oh, I think you'll like these ones."

"Ones - as in more than one? C'mon, at least give me a clue? It is my birthday, you know."

"Ha-ha, Granger - nice try. Let's go!"

-oOoOo-

Showered and dressed in her duelling robes after her run, Hermione now found Padma and Luna waiting on her. Birthday hugs were followed by gifts, there was no joke item from her best friend this year. The book's title might have caused some raised eyebrows amongst muggles, to Hermione, 'the bonds of love' would be read from cover to cover - looking for information on the special bond she shared with her mate.

The present she received from their younger friend was exquisite, strange, yet very touching at the same time. Hermione found herself holding a flower that had been turned into glass crystal, reflecting the light in a rainbow of colours. That the flower was a dandelion was neither here nor there, Hermione's smile saw Luna's face glow with a happiness that outshone her gift.

"It's a family spell my mother taught me, that's the first time I've cast it not using her wand. My room at home is full of them."

"It's beautiful, Luna, thank you very much."

Harry's arrival saw them all head down to breakfast, to find a great hall almost bereft of first and second year students. Neville soon joined them, wishing Hermione a happy birthday and handing over his present. Opening the wrapping revealed an elaborately carved silver photo frame, Hermione was in tears at the inscription, never mind the subject matter. 'Friends Forever' was a precious gift to a

girl who'd been friendless just over a year ago. The picture featured the four of them at the Black Sea, and Hermione remembered Augusta taking it. It was a wizarding picture that had them all laughing and clowning around for the camera, how happy they were was clearly projected from the frame.

The girls were so happy at this gift, Neville got a thank you kiss from both Hermione and Padma. Harry loved the gift too, but refrained himself to a comment. "Okay, Longbottom, way to set the present bar high."

"I'm sure you've got it covered, Harry. When gran showed me that photograph, I knew it would be perfect for this. I've got a copy for you and Padma too, mine is in a frame beside my bed."

Hermione had it sitting in the middle of the table and kept glancing at it as they ate breakfast, it was Padma who broached the subject of the missing students. "Where is everybody?."

"Well, the boys are queued outside Professor Flitwick's room, while the girls are waiting at Henrica's. New clothes for the ball are apparently more important than breakfast."

Neville's explanation had Padma looking toward Luna, she quickly answered the unspoken question. "Oh, I'm just happy to be going, I'll pop along later and pick up a dress."

"Well, we should be thankful for small mercies, at least we won't have Colin shoving his camera in our faces while he's waiting to get fitted for a suit. I swear some days I can still see flashes when I close my eyes. I think you should have a word with him, Harry..."

The blank looks coming from her fellow Ravenclaws generated the first twinge of unease in Padma. "He does follow you around, taking pictures when you least expect it?"

Hermione was shaking her head. "Not since the first day or so, he's calmed down since then..."

The giggles coming from Luna told them they were all missing something here, all except Neville. His head was down as he tried to eat his breakfast and blend into the surroundings.

Unease was quickly turning to alarm as Padma asked for answers. "Ok, Luna, what's going on?"

"Nothing at all, Colin is just sweet on you - very sweet!"

Padma's gaze shifted to Harry, he was clearly trying to stifle his laughter - and just as clearly didn't know about this beforehand. Hermione appeared as shocked as she felt but Neville still had his head down, refusing to meet anyone's eyes. "Neville?"

That was enough to see his feeble defences crumble. "I'm sorry, I should have told you. I thought Parvati would have mentioned it."

It was an even more confused Padma who asked for some elaboration. "Parvati? What has she got to do with this?"

Neville was struggling with what to say so decided to just blurt it out. "Colin asked her if she could teach him to dance. He wanted to learn for Hermione's party, Colin also wanted to know what it would be like to dance with you..."

Padma visibly winced at that. "Ouch! I'll bet Parvati took that well?"

"I think she got him with three stinging hexes before Colin managed to make it up the stairs to his dorm. It's been a running joke in Gryffindor for almost a week now."

This news certainly didn't improve Padma's mood. "My sister is being made fun of - and you never mentioned it?"

This was greeted by Neville shaking his head. "It's more Colin they're ribbing, it's good natured though and he's fine with it. I tried to speak with Parvati about this, and got my head chewed off. She told me that she didn't need her sister's boyfriend looking out for her - and then told me to piss off."

While the other three were contemplating that, Luna focused their thoughts. "Fred and George are almost the one person, but you and your sister are very different. I could never mistake you for Parvati."

Padma decided she would need to speak with her twin later, Professor Weasley had arrived for their lesson.

-oOoOo-

Harry was receiving strange looks from his three friends as they found themselves once more in the room that had held the diadem. He offered an explanation. "Today's lesson will be a bit different. We've been learning how to detect threats, today we get a chance to use this. Last time we were in here, we didn't really have time to explore. This morning we will, and hopefully sort some of the treasure from the junk. Oh, anything that has Hermione's name on it is hers!"

This certainly got the birthday girl's attention. "You hid presents for me in here?"

A smiling Harry answered his enthusiastic mate. "Just some of them, Hermione."

The quartet started searching, with anything that caught their interest being checked first. Bill was also on hand to make doubly sure they didn't come across anything they couldn't handle. They were working in pairs when Padma's shout had Hermione running over to see what she'd found - a small box with Hermione Granger written on a gift tag.

Opening the box, she discovered a pendant that had a familiar design. A golden chain was attached to a two inch hoop of the same material. A beautifully carved golden crow had its wings spread in flight across the hoop, but held a golden heart in its claws - instead of a sword.

"I've got the badges ready for the marauders on Tuesday night, but I had this one made especially for you. Do you like it?"

"Harry, I love it! Will you put it on me?"

Hermione lifted her hair as Harry fastened the clasp before giving her a kiss. "Beautiful, now let's see if you can find the other one?"

That was all the motivation Hermione needed, soon finding her other hidden gift. The young witch's hands were trembling as she realised what the ancient book was she now held in her hands. "Harry?"

"Helena was disgusted that Dumbledore forced you to cancel your party, she hopes this will help make up for that. The goblin translation charm Professor Flitwick cast on you is in there too - along with quite a few others. Helena also knew you would really appreciate it."

What Hermione held in her hands was a gift beyond treasure, a notebook belonging to Helena's mother, Rowena Ravenclaw.

A/N Thanks for reading

A/N 2 the video vote closes on Monday at noon (GMT) Thanks to all who voted and we should know if we made the final sometime this week. Will pass on the result with my next chapter.

## Chapter 40

If you closed your eyes in the great hall of Hogwarts, it would be impossible to guess that seventy percent of the students were off having their lunch in Hogsmeade. The first and second year students, who had no choice but to remain in the castle, were generating enough noise and excitement to easily compensate for those missing. All had gotten new outfits this morning and were busily describing them to anyone who'd listen.

Hermione's eyes were currently closed, well, Henrica's hands over them meant she couldn't see anything. The oh's and ah's of the great hall's occupants alerted her that something was going on, then bursting into singing 'Happy Birthday' was also a rather large clue.

Henrica removing her hands left Hermione looking at a rather large cake, complete with thirteen candles - all waiting to be blown out. Sirius was levitating it to a space on the table right in front of her that her friends had cleared. She may have been blushing from all the attention but Hermione was one happy witch. Blowing the candles out resulted in much cheering, and a pile of plates appearing beside the monster cake. Hermione cut a few pieces for her friends before allowing Hogwarts to take over the distribution. Pretty soon, everyone had a piece.

With almost the entire first and second year sitting at the Ravenclaw table, Sirius and Henrica joined them. The marauder was far too jovial for the current situation, telling those who knew him that Sirius was up to something. They didn't have long to wait.

"Well, Miss Granger, I also have some presents for you. I am under strict instructions though not to hand them over unless the homework we gave you last week get's an outstanding."

Hermione wasn't alone in asking. 'homework?'

"Oh dear, I expected better from you four. What will we do about this situation, Professor Hobson?"

"Well, Lord Black, they really leave me no option. I'm so disappointed in you four, I think your attitude really needs worked on. We shall do that tonight when the four of you have detention with me.

Don't bother with dinner, oh, and wear something nice."

Hannah may have started the giggling but it soon spread as more and more students realised exactly what was happening here. The loud laughter soon attracted an unwelcome visitor, the headmaster.

"I couldn't help overhearing professor that you gave four students detention for tonight, I hope you intend to have them doing meaningful work?"

Henrica had an answer ready for that particular question. "You mean like Professor Lockhart has students assist him with answering his fan mail? These four have been taking extra lessons on wizarding etiquette, Lord Black and I intend to ensure they don't embarrass us at the Merlin Ball next Saturday. We'll be working their socks off tonight."

"Forgive me for saying so, professor, but that sounds like a party to me. A party that you know I canceled."

"A party requires invited guests, headmaster, therefore this can't be a party. These four will be serving detention with us, that detention will consist of learning how to behave at a party. Of course, it will only be a simulation."

The sniggering from some of the pupils wasn't helping Albus' mood. "This appears to me to be a clear case of you attempting to undermine my authority as headmaster, something I can't allow..."

Sirius cut him off, though it was clearly Lord Black who stood to face Dumbledore. "I have with me the proper signed authority to take these four from Hogwarts right now. I would also like to add that this parchment doesn't contain a date for when they may return."

This had Albus in a cold sweat. "Might I see this signed authority?"

"If I have to take the parchment out my pocket, it stays out - and these four leave with us. It's your call, headmaster, what do you want to do?"

It wasn't lost on the students that this was pretty much a similar decision to the one Harry had been forced into by the headmaster, only Dumbledore didn't have Hermione to help him out.

Albus was sorely tempted to call Black's bluff, but he couldn't be one hundred percent sure it was a bluff. The goblin would certainly sign the papers to allow Harry and Miss Granger to leave, the other parents had also holidayed over the summer with Black. He really couldn't take the risk of losing Harry over something so trivial, it would be forgotten by the time the Merlin Ball came around.

"Carry on, Professor Hobson." With that, Albus headed off to his office.

A delighted Hermione now pounced on Harry, leaving him to thank the person who made this possible. "Sirius, have I ever told you that you're the coolest godfather on the planet!"

Sirius was apologising to the other girls for not being able to give them 'detention' too -hence the large birthday cake at lunchtime.

Padma was delighted for her friend, and then she felt the tug on her sleeve. Parvati appeared in a right temper.

"Were you really going to just leave Hogwarts with them? Don't I count for anything anymore?"

"Pav, if I know Sirius, he doesn't have any such parchment in his pocket."

This didn't lessen Parvati's glare, or ire. "I notice you didn't answer any of the questions I just asked. I suppose that in itself is an answer!"

Padma watched her twin sister storm away, before Lavender spoke to her.

"I'll try and calm her down but she'd went to a lot of trouble to get a date for Hermione's party. Hearing it was cancelled was bad enough. Now it's back on but she can't go..." Lavender didn't say the final part, both girls knew what she meant though. Parvati couldn't go - but Padma could. She felt a comforting arm slip around her shoulder and Neville's reassuring voice in her ear.



"It's not your fault, Padma, it isn't really Parvati's either. Dumbledore spoiled it for all of us. We both know Sirius would have everyone there if he could. Deep down, Parvati knows that too. When she cools down, she'll be sorry for what she said."

Neville found himself being kissed by Padma for the second time that day. "What did I do to deserve that?"

"Just for being you, and keep your arm there. If I have to protect you from witches, you can start repaying me by discouraging amorous first years - especially ones with camera's."

-oOoOo-

Hermione was having a wonderful time. A lovely meal had been shared by the six of them, now it was time to dance. Hogwarts had provided a room that was a lot more intimate than anything they were used to, next week's ball would be a much grander affair.

Harry glanced at the witch in his arms and smiled. "I did have contingency plans in place, you know, there was no way we weren't doing this on your birthday."

As they waltzed around the small dance floor, Hermione's curiosity was piqued. "Oh, and just what did you have planned?"

"Dinner for two, followed by dancing - in my room. I had already arranged with Hogwarts to remove the bed and gotten my hands on a wizarding wireless."

"That sounds lovely, though I'm sure Dumbledore would still have found something to complain about. No chaperone? - I can just see Slughorn volunteering..."

"Oh I had a chaperone arranged too, one that not even the headmaster could fault - Lady Helena."

Remembering her gift saw Hermione's eyes sparkle even more. "That would have given me a chance to thank her in private. Mentioning I've got one of her mother's notebooks would start a riot at the Ravenclaw table. You really get on well with her, don't you?"

"She's a very nice lady, I can kinda understand what it must have been like for her. I have the whole goblin / boy-who-lived rubbish to put up with, imagine trying to live up to being Rowena Ravenclaw's daughter? Recovering her diadem was a big relief from the guilt she had been carrying, you must have noticed she now smiles a lot more than she used to?"

This had Hermione nodding. "I came down the other morning and she was sitting having a conversation with Luna, both looked really pleased with their chat..."

"I'm so sorry Luna couldn't be here tonight, she was really looking forward to going to a party..."

Hermione had another reason to regret her original party being canceled. "I hope Parvati doesn't give Padma too hard a time because she couldn't come here tonight, Sirius explained it to everyone..."

Harry was hoping that his final gift for Hermione went as well as the rest of her birthday. With this one though, he could only hope - and wait for Eargit's arrival in the morning.

-oOoOo-

Dan had Emma wrapped in his arms. They were sitting on their sofa, watching Hermione's message replay on a loop setting. Both parents really missed their daughter, especially today, and this way it at least felt as if they got to see Hermione on her birthday.

"I still can't believe how much she's grown, or that she didn't have this written down - word for word."

"Her reading from a prepared script wouldn't have had anywhere near the same impact as this did. That is our Hermione, wearing her heart on her sleeve." This was not the first time Emma had disagreed with her husband over their daughter, it was time to face her own mistakes from that night.

"Dan, I'm so sorry. You had legitimate concerns for our daughter's safety and I just ignored them - and you. I saw Hermione breaking her heart and immediately cast you as the villain. Seeing the kids' reactions just scrambled my brains and I panicked too..."

Dan just held his wife closer, providing comfort as she cried into his chest. "Sirius wasn't the only one who noticed you 'mothering' those two boys. I know we always wanted more children, we only drew back from adopting when Hermione started having bouts of accidental magic - I wish we could have known that's what it was at the time."

Emma well remembered the numbing terror of thinking there was something wrong with their daughter, toddlers shouldn't be able to have their picture books floating to them.

Her husband's arms provided comfort as he attempted to analyse exactly what went wrong that night. "Our reactions were all pretty predictable, and it hurts even more because of that. I saw Hermione in danger, and tried to remove her from the threat. Hermione saw me trying to separate her from Harry, there was only one way she was ever going to react to that. You saw a distraught daughter, and mummy bear went into protecting cubs mode. We were all right, but at the same time all wrong."

As both contemplated their actions that night, they were interrupted by a knock at the door. That it was the back door immediately focused their attention, that door was now only used by people portkeying into the garden.

The quizzical glances were soon replaced by excitement as Emma had a thought. "Sirius? He must have had to bring the kids home..."

This had both racing to the back door, not realising Hermione wouldn't have knocked at her own home. Their visitor was the last person they expected to be standing there.

Noticing Emma had been crying, he asked if this was a bad time. The entire situation was awkward enough without adding anything else to the mix. Both Grangers quickly reassured their guest that this was not the case, inviting the goblin into their lounge - where the message from Hermione was still playing.

This halted Barchoke in his tracks, he was unable to take his eyes off Hermione pleading for her family to be put together again. As the recording ended, Dan stepped forward to stop the cycle repeating.

He and his wife were wondering just what the goblin was doing in Crawley when Barchoke spoke.

"Children are a wonderful blessing, and sometimes we have to stand back and look at things from their perspective. We have Sirius providing lessons to them on wizarding culture, while you have done your best to equip them both to survive in the muggle world - as have I for our culture. In all that we made a terrible mistake, no one is teaching the parents about these cultures - cultures that are totally alien to us. Our children hope to be able to wrap their lives around all three, yet we are totally ignorant about two of them. I believe this was the basis for our misunderstanding, and really hope we can move forward from here."

This left Dan and Emma gobsmacked, and Barchoke wasn't yet finished with the shocks. "I understand from my son that not asking a girl's father for her hand is a serious breach of your protocol? On behalf of my son and I, I would like to offer our apologies for this. Harry assures me it is something he intends to put right, he will be asking your permission before they get engaged. I believe Hermione's seventeenth birthday was mentioned as a possible date for this event."

Dan had thought about what he was going to say to Barchoke but the goblin turning up here and apologising to him blew all his carefully considered words out through his ears. "Should Harry approach me with that question, my answer will of course be yes. I'm hardly likely to grill him about his future prospects, or whether he can support my little girl."

Emma held her breath at Dan's attempt at humour, especially at a time like this. A slight grin from Barchoke signalled that her husband had actually judged the mood right.

"You know fine well that the reason I'll be saying yes is I truly believe what Hermione said in her message to us, their bond indicates they could search the entire country and not find anyone more suited. They make each other happy, and what more could a father ask for? I should have taken the time to see that, instead of acting the way I did. For that, I too am sorry."

The goblin nodded his acceptance. "Harry also sent a message to me, saying that an Ambassador has to be able to see both sides of

any arguments, and then negotiate a settlement that lands somewhere in the middle."

"Is that why you're here?" Emma just had to ask.

"My son's words made me stand back and think, it was something else though that brought me here tonight. I asked Harry what I could get my daughter for her birthday, he replied that putting our family back together again would be the greatest gift I could give Hermione. From what I saw of her message my son was right."

The shocked silence this was greeted with by both Grangers saw Barchoke think he'd overstepped the mark. "I'm sorry if I got it wrong by calling Hermione my daughter..."

Emma's hand on his arm stopped him saying any more. "Providing you don't mind us considering Harry as our son too, I certainly have no problems with that." Dan's nod of agreement saw a lot of the tension leave the room.

"Stay and celebrate our daughter's birthday with us. There is so much we need to talk about, so much we still don't know about each other. Let's sit and chat, and try to ensure something like that evening will never happen again." Dan's words started the rebuilding of their family. That it was being developed on the love each parent had for their children meant their family was being rebuilt on a strong foundation, and would rise like a Phoenix from the ashes - reborn and be even stronger than before.

-oOoOo-

Hermione could see Harry was nervous about something as they headed down to breakfast, she couldn't think of any reason for this and resolved to ask him about it as soon as they were alone. Eargit's arrival saw that anxiety spike before Harry's face wore a wide smile. She couldn't contain her curiosity any longer. "Harry, anything you want to tell me?"

Switching to his own language, Harry gave his bonded her final present for her birthday. ""My father asked what he could get his daughter for her birthday, I told him putting our family back together would be a great gift. He celebrated your birthday in Crawley last night, with your mum and dad.""

Hermione had been blown away with the stud earrings Sirius brought from Barchoke, her 'real' gift though left her speechless. Fortunately, she didn't need words to display how much that news meant to her. Leaning forward, she gave Harry a kiss that contained all the love she felt for her wonderful mate.

There were witches sitting at the Ravenclaw table who still harboured hopes of dating the boy-who-lived, those hopes died as they witnessed that kiss. It wasn't by any means a snog-feast, it wasn't even passionate. There was just so much love and tenderness expressed between the couple by this simple act that you would need to have been really stupid to harbour any hope that these two weren't a very serious couple - and stupid people didn't get to wear the blue and bronze of Ravenclaw.

Padma hadn't noticed Harry's anxiety though could hardly miss him conversing with Hermione in his own language. Her fears were immediately quashed by Hermione's reaction to whatever the news was, it was now time to tease. "Okay, now you two have gotten that out of your system, care to share the good news?"

Hermione's eyes never left Harry's as she gave her friend enough information to fill in any blanks. "Harry's father celebrated my birthday with my mum and dad last night."

This saw Padma dive on both of them, knowing how much this meant to her friends, the comment from Rodger followed on close behind. "Any news you'd like to share there, Harry?"

"Only that I am one lucky guy, Roger."

"Sitting there with two girls hugging you at breakfast, it's kinda hard to disagree with that."

This drew some laughs and Harry was quite prepared to joke right back. "Patil hugs are only surpassed by those from a Granger, though I don't think Neville would agree with me!" Seeing Padma blush at that just added to their good mood, she teased Harry and Hermione enough to warrant some gentle payback. Bill's arrival signalled it was time to get serious, they were all up for their lesson today.

-oOoOo-

Crow's Marauders were also up for their lesson on Tuesday evening. Having them swap activities last week meant tonight was the time to put those lessons into practice. They were split into teams of four, wherever possible ensuring that each team had a member of the four houses and was a balance of the sexes. They were then involved in a round-robin tournament that whittled them down to four teams. A semi-final and final soon followed.

Luna's team actually reached the final, and she was the last member standing. Unfortunately there were still two left from the other team and she got tagged taking one of the pair out. There was loud cheering from all present and the winners got a cake of Honeyduke's finest chocolate. The four friends ended the evening by handing out the club badges to all members, leaving a lot of extremely happy first years heading back to their dorms.

Henrica walked back with them as the quartet also headed back, they were discussing what had worked, what hadn't and who had excelled.

Neville was shaking his head at Colin's antics. "He's bought into the whole 'brave Gryffindor' persona, that's why he keeps charging right into battle. His curses are accurately cast but, against four opponents, you are always going to get hit. I think we need to start using stinging curses, that should discourage that behaviour a lot more than a blob of colour that disappears. In any real fight, his tactics would see him hit every time."

Hermione found herself agreeing. "He's agile enough to be good at evading, he just doesn't seem to want to. There were a few more who acted the same."

Harry had experience of this phenomenon from his own training. "When you make training fun, there's a tendency to treat it like a game. Goblins are taught with wooden swords but are moved onto real blades as soon as they've mastered the basics. I agree with Neville, nothing focuses your mind more than knowing your opponent is trying to do you an injury with their weapon. I think we would then need to cut it down to pairs though, having eight first years firing off stinging hexes at the same time is a recipe for disaster."

The three claws entered their common room to hear the first years raving about their lesson, and proudly displaying their badges. Harry needed his lightning fast reflexes when a curse suddenly came flying at them, he deflected it harmlessly into the ceiling while Padma and Hermione took down their attacker with a couple of very accurate stunners.

Roger woke to find himself flat on his back, and the sword of Gryffindor resting under his chin. "I would like an explanation, Davies, and I would like it now."

The explanation didn't help the trio. "...and that, ladies and gentlemen, is why we need them to train us in defence. I'm a fourth year, near the top of my year too, yet three second years easily handled my surprise attack - before handing me my arse. You might also notice that every wand in first and second year is currently pointing at me, now that is how it's supposed to be."

Harry felt a gentle hand on his shoulder as Penny spoke to him. "It's okay, Harry, I've got this. Professor Flitwick turned down their request for extra defence lessons. He said it would cause problems with the other houses if these lessons were only available for Ravenclaws, and he doesn't have the time to basically do the job Lockhart's already being paid to do. Roger here, however unwisely, was trying to prove a point that you were our next best option."

"I expected to get taken down, but not that easily. What did I do wrong?"

Harry sheathed his sword before helping his friend to his feet. "Your curse was powerfully enough but your aim was slightly off. It was going to hit my shoulder, making it easier to dodge, but I knew Padma was behind me. I deflected it upward to be safe."

Padma then joined the critique. "You fired a curse and then just stood there, waiting to see what would happen next. Against multiple opponents you should have continued to cast, and been on the move at all times."

This was normal procedure for the Ravenclaw trio, they did it after every fight. The rest of the house though watched on in



astonishment as Hermione continued ripping Roger's technique to shreds. As he was the one who ended up on the ground, they couldn't find fault with one word of it. "You also didn't use any of the advantages your ambush site provided. There is big heavy furniture and doorways to provide cover, you didn't use any of it."

"Okay, I'm now more convinced than ever I need some defence lessons from you guys. Any time, any place, just say the word and I'll be there."

Rodger's pleading meant Harry was always going to cave on this one. "We have the ball on Saturday, you get a list together of those who want to be involved and we'll see what we can do next week."

The older wizard now had his arm around Harry's shoulders. "Thanks Harry, I knew we could count on you..." Roger now had a puzzled look on his face as he removed his arm and prodded Harry on the chest. "Merlin, Harry, you're solid! What the hell do you eat to get like that?"

"Mister Davies, would you kindly stop prodding my boyfriend. You don't get like that from eating, rather years of hard work. I happen to like it - very much!" She now had her arms wrapped about Harry as Roger appeared more embarrassed over this than getting stunned.

Penny then dragged him away for a severe bollocking, explaining in no uncertain terms what would happen the next time he fired a curse in the common room. The second year trio got their books out and joined the rest of their yearmates in some studying before bed. It was potions first thing tomorrow and no one wanted to enter that class unprepared - checking that everyone knew exactly what they were supposed to be doing had become a bit of a ritual the evening before Master Pitslay's classes.

-oOoOo-

Gilderoy had something of a dilemma on his hands. He so wanted to attend the Merlin Ball, Gilderoy had the exact outfit in mind. The problem was that, as a guest of honour, he would be obliged to wear an Order of Merlin. He'd worried the problem like a dog with a bone before finally getting to the marrow of the problem. Gilderoy had narrowed it down to two choices, each option though was not without risk.

His first was to feign illness. This was risky in that Hogwarts had its own healer on the premises and his presence at the ball was sure to be missed. There was also the fact that Gilderoy really wanted to go to the ball.

His other option was to attend and just bluff his way through the evening. This was his favourite option for two reasons. The first one was obvious, he got to attend the ball. The second was also self explanatory. The gullible wizarding public had been swallowing the shite he'd been passing off as the truth for years, why should Saturday night be any different.

-oOoOo-

Harry felt different as he walked down to breakfast and it wasn't hard to work out why. He was wearing his tunic as normal on a weekend, his sword was at his hip, his epaulettes were displayed on his shoulders, his centurion bands - as well as Hermione - were on his arm. The only difference was the award worn on his chest, and yet it seemed to change everything.

Hermione had given him his morning kiss, but then said he looked so handsome. He himself felt like a warrior on parade, awaiting an inspection from the director. Harry thought letting Henrica borrow his award to display to her classes would have lessened the effect but people were certainly treating him differently - almost reverently. He wondered if this was how Dumbledore became so detached from reality? Harry had this reaction for less than an hour and already knew he didn't like it, Dumbledore had been receiving this treatment for decades.

Harry also had friends who would quickly put him right if his head started getting too big. Padma would soon puncture an inflated head with a few well-aimed barbs, and he didn't even want to think what Hermione's reaction to any arrogance on his part would be.

On entering the great hall, custom dictated Harry headed for the staff table. Harry added the centurion salute to his bow to the headmaster, a fellow Order of Merlin holder. His award shining brightly on the dark purple robes that could almost have been classed as demure for Dumbledore.

Whatever Harry's dispute with the headmaster, it was irrefutable that Dumbledore had earned his Order of Merlin, First Class, the hard way. He had been a great warrior for the light once, though appeared to have lost his way as he'd aged.

"Well met, Headmaster."

"A good morning to you too, Centurion." Albus had stood and returned the bow. If nothing else, the award pinned to the lad's tunic deserved it. "It would appear the third member of our exclusive group has yet to join us for breakfast. Since I know you have lessons for the rest of the day, I'm sure you can leave the formalities until tonight's ball." Both Harry and Albus were smiling as he headed back to the Ravenclaw table. That in itself was something of a major achievement.

When Bill arrived for their lesson, a quick word saw Harry reach a decision. "Roger, you're with us. If you want to learn so badly that you'll ambush us in the common room, I think it's time you learned what you're letting yourself in for."

Roger was out of his seat like a shot, following them out the hall. Lockhart never made an appearance at breakfast.

The defence professor was also conspicuous by his absence at lunch, as was Roger Davies. It was actually Cho who worked up the courage to ask where he was. This enquiry was greeted with four smiles before Harry answered.

"He's in his room, probably sleeping by now. Will someone make sure to wake him in time for tonight's ball? Oh, and do it early enough to make sure he has plenty of time for a hot bath, best thing for sore muscles."

"What did you do to him?"

Padma resented that question, she didn't even see who asked it but that didn't matter. "We didn't do anything to him, he just wanted to do the same lesson as us. Roger spent the last half hour of the lesson lying exhausted on the floor. We do this for six hours every weekend, Roger thought he could dive right in and do the same, he's physically and magically exhausted but should feel better after

a few hours sleep. We have another set of lessons to go yet - and then the ball!"

No more questions were asked, though Roger would be well and truly quizzed later.

-oOoOo-

Harry was left questioning his eyesight as Hermione floated down the stairs to meet him, he knew his mate was beautiful but this was just too much. Her blue dress just did something that melted his insides. A gentle kiss of greeting got his brain into gear once more and he offered Hermione his arm. His 'my lady' comment wasn't missed by anyone there either, Hermione was certainly his lady.

Harry then offered his other arm to Padma. "Miss Patil, may I escort you to your date? I wouldn't want anyone to get the idea you were available, Neville would be most upset."

The trio led the students of Ravenclaw house toward the seventh floor, where quite a crowd had gathered. The headmaster, and most of the staff, were waiting on them - along with the Lady Helena.

Harry bowed deeply to the ghost. "My Lady, please thank Hogwarts for providing the room tonight."

Helena's voice held some mirth as she replied. "Hogwarts is very pleased with the changes her champion is instigating, and welcomed the idea of the entire school being able to celebrate on this special day. I would like to propose that the last Saturday in September be set aside to make this an annual event, it certainly gets the school year off to a magnificent start. We've never seen the students so happy and think this should be encouraged."

Albus quickly stepped in to gain some more much-needed positive points with the students. "I think that is a tremendous idea and will certainly add it to the school calendar for future years."

The evening was off to a flier and Harry hadn't even opened the room yet. When he did, more than a few jaws hit the floor. The room surpassed anything they had seen before.

Yes it was slightly bigger than the great hall but Hogwarts had solved the accommodation problem using a different method. There was a stage for the band located in one corner of the square room, with tables that held twelve all around the sides. Above those tables was a series of balconies that, except for above the stage, surrounded the hall. The entire room was of a grandeur that hadn't been seen since the height of the Baroque period, and outside of a royal palace. Harry couldn't help but think that was appropriate, since the girl on his arm was like a princess to him. This also meant the period dress of the first and second years now fitted right in.

An ornamental and exquisitely carved fountain occupied the middle of the dance floor with all the hall's carvings and gold gilt being highlighted by twenty magnificent crystal chandeliers.

There was more than a glint of humour from the Ravenclaw ghost as she jokingly enquired if the room would do, Harry's answer though showed just how much he had picked up from Sirius' lessons.

"My Lady, I appreciate Hogwarts attempt to match the beauty of my date, it was a valiant attempt." No living person had ever heard the Grey Lady laugh before, the delightful and almost musical sound had everyone considering they would need a more appropriate name for the Ravenclaw ghost. When Helena smiled, there was nothing grey about the ghost who'd clearly been a great beauty when alive.

"We thought the first, second and third years would appreciate the balconies, allowing them to see everything that happens - without feeling obliged to dance if they don't want to."

This proved a really popular suggestion as the lower years headed for the staircases.

Dumbledore was not alone in being surprised at just how much control this second year had over the castle, or how much the Lady Helena had changed.

Hannah and Susan had invited Ernie and Justin to be their dates for Hermione's cancelled party, they naturally just continued that arrangement for the ball. Parvati surprised them by arriving on the arm of Blaise Zabini, though Padma made sure there were two seats next to her available for her twin and her date.

Colin was rather chivalrously about to give up his own place at Harry's table to allow Ginny and Luna to join them, when Hogwarts increased the size of their table. Not only was there a place for Colin, there were two as-yet unoccupied place settings. That puzzle was soon solved by the arrival of Henrica and Sirius.

"Do you mind if we sit with you lot for the evening? Downstairs is just so...what in the name of Merlin is that?"

His godfather's exclamation had everyone at the table turning to see what had caused this outburst. Not that every eye wasn't now turned in that direction anyway - just as he'd there was one thing Gilderoy knew how to do, it was make an entrance - and what an entrance!

He'd timed it to perfection, everyone else had arrived but dinner had yet to be served. He stood there in what Gilderoy considered a heroic pose, allowing everyone to get a good look at him. His black patent leather boots hugged his calves to just below his knees, their heels adding an inch and a half to his height. Those same boots melted into a pair of purple breeches that had bright red cavalry stripes down the side, they also gave new definition to the phrase 'tight'. The bulge at his groin caused Luna to ask if he wasn't staying for dinner, since he'd brought his own lunch box.

His royal blue bum-freezer jacket had more gold braid than a dozen admirals and he actually wore a leather scabbard - containing his wand instead of a sword. His ridiculous ensemble was completed by a short fur-lined cape, jauntily worn over one shoulder. There was no way Gilderoy Lockhart was going to hide his trademark golden locks under any kind of hat.

Harry audibly groaned, knowing what was required of him now. He stood to find Hermione right beside him, the grip on his arm saying she was accompanying him.

"If he tries to grab my boyfriend again, I'm going to introduce him to my blade." This drew smiles from all around the table, they all knew Hermione was really going down there to drag Harry off the prat if he started anything. They just hoped she let him beat Lockhart up a bit first - beat up a lot worked for them too.

The couple found the headmaster waiting at the bottom of the stairs, together they walked toward the still posing professor. "Excuse me, Professor Lockhart, I fail to spot your Order of Merlin amongst the rest of the paraphernalia you're currently wearing?"

Hermione had a closer view than anyone else but she was sure those in the hall were reaching the same conclusion as she was. Dumbledore wore his award with pride, and effortlessly projected the image of an elder statesman. Harry on the other hand looked the epitome of a young warrior, even as he walked toward Lockhart you could see he was ready for instant action.

Lockhart on the other hand had deliberately aimed for a military theme, something again he had no right to. He'd gone for hussar, and ended up with bizarre! He looked like someone who'd been kicked out of the Village People for being too outlandish, Hermione wondered if she could get the band to play Y.M.C.A.?

Gilderoy then unveiled his master plan, and his 'award'. "Ah, headmaster, I was sure you would notice that. When the Merlin committee were debating my award, it was mentioned that my greatest wish was world peace. They then struck my award especially for me."

The defence professor then indicated a gold peace symbol hanging from a scarlet ribbon, a symbol that was recognised even in goblin society. Hermione had also spotted an 'I heart N.Y.' medallion hanging from a piece of ribbon too. While Harry and even Dumbledore were struck dumb by the audacity of the wizard, Hermione's mind went into hyperdrive. She moved her own medallion onto her dress, just above her heart, and a quick sticking charm saw it held there.

"How silly of me, I forgot to wear my Order of the Avis, First Class. The awards committee knew my greatest wish too, a golden crow holding my heart. The Second Class award is of course silver, and features a sword. Can we assume the committee also knew of your allergy to bronze, and made your Third Class award out of gold instead?"

Albus was actually enjoying watching these two take someone else apart for a change, that was until he noticed the glints of silver from above. Miss Granger's actions had set off a chain reaction amongst

the first years. It would appear as if every single one of them had brought their badges to the ball, all now wore them on their jackets and dresses like Miss Granger.

Devotion like that reminded Albus of another young man, though Tom was in fourth year before he began gathering followers around him. Harry already had first year wrapped-up, along with the vast majority of second. With the Weasley twins and the Davies boy, they were making inroads into fourth too! Albus couldn't help but hear the Ravenclaw boy raving about the defence lesson he attended this morning, his claim that he had learned more in those three hours than his previous three years at Hogwarts was certainly being believed.

He almost opened his mouth to say something before deciding to let Lockhart be the one to put his foot in it tonight, and Lockhart duly obliged. Totally missing the sarcasm from Miss Granger, he quickly confirmed her suspicion that he was indeed allergic to bronze.

The three walked away, leaving Lockhart thinking that once again he'd fooled everyone. Thanks to Henrica's lessons, the entire student population now knew Lockhart's outrageous claims were a pile of shit. That neither Harry nor the Headmaster bowed to Lockhart also indicated that they both knew that too. The only one fooled was the fool himself, Gilderoy Lockhart.

A/N Thanks for reading.



## Chapter 41

Albus sat in this magnificent room and watched as his entire school, excuse the pun, had a ball! None of the staff had been involved in the preparations, nor were they needed to supervise their charges. Jugs of punch and pumpkin juice were on every table, refilling before they had time to empty. The house ghosts patrolled around the tables, chatting with anyone who had the time to talk. After the elves had provided a wonderful meal, the band had turned up and now dancing was the order of the evening.

Albus also noticed some couples sitting on the marble ledge around the fountain's circular basin, the entire structure acting as a cooling off area for the dancers. Albus was here tonight purely as a guest, and that's exactly how he felt - a guest in his own school. Losing even a little control would normally have Albus reaching for his wand to rectify the situation, but not tonight. The reason for that was simple, it was Hogwarts herself who was in control here this evening - and doing a magnificent job of it.

Horace watched as everyone had fun, he was so depressed. How had two Gryffindors and a couple of Ravenclaws managed to destroy a famous wizard's reputation so easily? They also did it in a way that the fool still hadn't realised every single person in the hall now knew he was a liar.

The head of Slytherin thought he was dealing with a couple of second years, and that gaining their confidence would be easy. He hadn't done his homework and gotten savaged during his clumsy approach. Albus of course hadn't mentioned any of this when he conned him out of retirement and into returning to Britain, Horace was only now beginning to realise just how much he hadn't been told. His only chance now appeared to be somehow gaining the boy's respect - grudging or otherwise. To do that though would take every piece of Slytherin cunning he had.

Minerva watched her students having a great time and, reputation be damned, she just had to smile. Between her time as a student in the castle and then her teaching years, Minerva had almost half a century of experience inside Hogwarts. In all that time, Minerva could honestly say she'd never seen anything like this. Hogwarts sure knew how to throw a party.

Her eyes caught a sight she still didn't believe, a second year dancing with a veela professor - with both of them laughing and chatting away. That second year being one of her young lions, Mr Longbottom, just added to her sense of astonishment. Minerva would bet her pension she wasn't the only person inside the castle who was continually having to upgrade her opinion of that young wizard.

Gilderoy also noticed Henrica dancing with the second year and was considering cutting-in, until he recognised who that second year was. He then spied Black dancing with the sword wielding witch, and Crow soon followed them round with his friend's date as a partner. This just seemed to sum up his evening. He'd been so looking forward to this ball but it was turning into a personal disaster.

He was expecting the girls to flock to him, not scatter in different directions anytime he approached. Not only had every witch spurned his advances and offers to dance, most of them had rushed away in the opposite direction before he could even ask them. Hogwarts was turning into a major disappointment, the press didn't even ask to take his picture when they arrived.

Harry was back dancing with Hermione as they twirled around the fountain, holding his princess in his arms as they waltzed around this magical setting. This was worth putting up with Lockhart and Dumbledore, this was priceless.

Hermione smiled as she asked him about tonight. "Do you think this will see Lockhart chased out the castle?"

"I doubt it, that would mean Dumbledore not only admitting he was wrong but doing something about it. Remember, this was a prank Fred and George played on Lockhart. Looking at it from that angle, it's a fantastic success. The entire castle now knows Gilderoy Lockhart is a liar, and we even got a ball out of it too!"

When she followed Harry's logic, Hermione had to agree. She also knew the news would be filtering out to homes all over the country. This might not be the knock-out blow that finally flattened Lockhart but it was the first step to destroying his reputation. Unlike Dumbledore, a reputation would appear to be all that Lockhart had. She was reminded of the Emperor's new clothes, and how it was children who solved that puzzle too.

-oOoOo-

The group of friends left the ball together as they headed back to their dorms. Whether it was chivalry or the presence of Harry and Neville, Blaise kissed Parvati on the back of her hand and thanked her for a lovely evening. Colin escorted an almost floating Ginny through the portrait hole after Parvati. Ginny just had the best night of her life, a night that also included a dance with Harry. She was in heaven - until her brother spoiled it.

"You traitorous bitch! Why don't you go down to the dungeons where you obviously belong?"

It was only when Parvati answered that Ginny realised Ron's tirade wasn't aimed at her.

"Listen Weasley, who cares what you think? Take your attitude out of my face before I decorate the common room with it."

"Oh yeah, think Crow is going to come running to save you? He only does that for your sister..."

Padma had been outside saying goodnight to Neville when she heard the shouting, discovering her sister was involved saw her head straight into the lion's den.

Ron suddenly had double vision with both Patil sisters now in his face. "Listen weasel, my sister doesn't need anyone to rescue her from the likes of you. We always have each other's backs and there won't be enough of your bigoted carcass left to decorate this common room with if you forget that."

Looking desperately for help, Ron attempted to turn the argument around in his favour. "First she dates a Slytherin, now we have a Ravenclaw in our common room! Is everyone else here okay with this?"

Neville had of course followed Padma inside and stood squarely behind the twins on this argument. "What Parvati does is none of your business, Weasley. She hasn't broken any rules and you have no authority inside Gryffindor, far less Hogwarts."

"Well, we can't all be school champions! Is your buddy Crow getting ready to come in here and wave his fancy sword around? Is that what happens next?"

What happened next was Percy entering the common room, Ron grasped this fortuitous event and treated it almost as if the cavalry had arrived to save him from the circling savages. "Percy, not content with dating a Slytherin, she then has a Ravenclaw in our common room." Ron confidently stood back, expecting his brother to now administer the justice he was unable to.

Percy looked to Padma for an explanation of her presence here, she didn't take long to provide an answer. "Your prat of a brother is probably the only person in the castle who didn't have a great time tonight, he then decided to spread that misery around by screaming at Parvati. I was outside saying goodnight to Neville and wasn't about to let him get away with that."

"She dated a Slytherin!" Ron appeared to think that if he achieved enough volume then everyone would finally understand the point he was trying to make. Unfortunately, for Ron that is, he chose to shout this in Padma's face from a distance measured in mere inches.

As Ron's spittle sprayed over Padma's face, Neville's fist connected with his - dropping Ron onto his arse.

Percy's hand gripping his arm stopped Neville taking any further action, apart from removing a hankie and offering it to Padma.

"Ron, go to bed!"

"But Percy, he just hit me! Surely you're going to do something about that?"

"Had you acted that way to Penny, I would have flattened you - if Penny didn't do it first. Go to bed, now!"

As Ron slunk his way up the stairs, Percy turned his attention to the girls. "I must apologise for my brother's behaviour..."

It was Padma who cut him off. "No you don't, Percy. Apart from your brother, Charlie, we've met your entire family. We've liked them all but Ron sticks out like a sore thumb with his crass behaviour. You

shouldn't have to apologise for him, he probably doesn't even realise what he's done wrong. Thanks for that, Neville, I was about to reach for my wand when you flattened him."

She then turned her attention to her sister. "Are you okay, Pav?"

"I was perfectly capable of dealing with that situation on my own, I don't need you - or anyone else - rushing to my rescue."

This took the breath from Padma. " ...but we've always looked out for each other."

"Well, you've made it plain that situation has changed. Christmas, summer and now Halloween! How can we look out for each other when you're never around?"

Parvati headed for her own staircase, leaving Neville to escort Padma back outside where the rest of their friends were waiting. Neville's comforting arm was replaced by that of Hermione as Padma found herself now sandwiched between her two friends. "How much of that did you hear?"

Hermione's arm tightened around Padma as she answered. "All of it. It looks like Parvati didn't take the news you would be going with us at Halloween as well as you thought."

"Christmas is nothing more than a break from school for us, Halloween is different. This will be the first one we've ever spent apart. I don't know if I want to go now."

Harry tried to help. "Neither Hermione nor I have any experience of siblings but we have had to work our way around the differences thrown up between us and our families. Trying to look at the situation from different perspectives has helped us. What would you think or do if the shoe was on the other foot, if it was Parvati who was going with us at Halloween?"

This got Padma thinking. "I see what you mean, but this is hard..."

Hermione confirmed it had been hard for them too, encouraging Padma to continue.

"I would like to think I'd be pleased for her. Parvati would look at this weekend as being the lead-up to an offer of betrothal from Neville - that's probably what's got her so mad. She would never understand that Neville and I could just be friends."

Hermione had a front row seat as she watched their two friends begin the journey from friendship to possibly something more. If she could see that, it was a certainty Parvati could too! Padma herself had said that her sister was always the twin who drew the most attention, watching Padma with Neville must be hard for Parvati to take. Her less popular sister appeared to effortlessly obtain what was Parvati's greatest wish - a boyfriend who had the potential to be so much more. That this was a boy Parvati had previously attempted to ensnare must be particularly rankling. Like the rest of their friends, the smartest witch in their year dismissed the problem as jealousy on Parvati's part.

Padma herself had reached the same conclusion, it didn't hurt any less because of that.

-oOoOo-

That morning's Prophet pleased everyone - except Lockhart. They had led with the headline 'A Celebration Merlin Would Be Proud Of', accompanied by a picture that showed lots of first and second years' posed around the fountain.

That his school was shown in such a positive light pleased Dumbledore no end, he was more than happy to bask in the reflected glory this story generated. The way things had been going lately, Albus was happy simply not being publicly berated for something - it made a pleasant change.

Harry was also happy. Apart from there being some mention of the Order of Merlin winners in attendance, he didn't feature in the story. Thirty or so very happy students had their picture on the front page of the Prophet, and the article promised more pictures from the ball in their sister publication, Teen Witch Weekly, which intended to do a full spread on the 'new' fashion sweeping Britain's magical community.

Roger was unhappy that he wasn't going to attend the extra defence lessons today, that was until Harry had a private word with him.

"Having someone older there certainly helped us, so we're thinking of making it a permanent arrangement. We're also thinking of including Fred and George, but don't know any older student's well enough to figure out who else to ask. Penny would be the obvious choice but that would really mean taking Percy too! I don't know if we're ready to mix it with sixth years' just yet."

Roger privately thought Harry could mix it with just about anyone but had a suggestion to make. "What about Cedric Diggory? He's a fourth year Puff, and I'll vouch for him being a good guy."

"Didn't his father just become the Chief Warlock?"

It was a puzzled Roger who answered that question with one of his own. "Yes, do you have a problem with that?"

"No, but I wouldn't want him thinking that's why we were asking."

"Harry, you don't even know Cedric ... Oh, I see! I'll tell him the truth, it was me who suggested he join us."

This got a nod of agreement. "I'll need to check with Assistant Ambassador Weasley first, but you can see if he's interested. If nothing else, it gives us a mixture of houses."

Roger immediately headed off to the Hufflepuff table for a talk with Cedric though Bill spotted a potential problem the minute Harry mentioned the names.

"I know you don't pay much attention to Quidditch, Harry, but those four are all on their house teams. The chance of them having every Saturday morning free are nil."

Bill was right, Quidditch held no interest for Harry but he did know Roger and the twins played. "What about having them join us every Sunday? That would still leave us Saturdays to work on things ourselves."

Liking that idea, Bill suggested it was time to put it to the group. He signalled for the twins to come over while Harry did the same with Roger. The fourth year Ravenclaw brought Cedric along and introduced him to the four friends.

Bill then laid out their proposal. "You four want extra tuition in defence, and I want to match this lot up against some older opponents. We're proposing to do both every Sunday morning - if you're up for it?"

The twins agreed at once while Roger had a question. "Cedric mentioned Quidditch, is that why you're offering Sundays?"

"Yes, this lot might not bother with the game but I knew you four had Quidditch commitments."

Both Roger and Cedric confirmed they would be delighted to accept, only to quickly discover what they'd let themselves in for.

"Okay, we've already wasted five minutes standing here blethering - let's move it!"

There was no hesitation amongst the four friends, they shot out of the hall - leaving the others to chase after them. That same quartet of second years sat showered and changed at lunch, while a certain four fourth years were conspicuous by their absence.

A certain professor noticed this, and the esteem this gained the second years from the other students. It was time to try a different approach.

-oOoOo-

Before they arrived for breakfast on Monday morning, Harry must have denied he was holding a duelling club at least a dozen times to excited questioners. Apparently notices for this club had appeared in all four houses.

Padma attempted to look on the bright side. "At least they're holding it tonight, and not in direct competition to 'Crow's Marauders'."

"I think I prefer the Order of the Avis..."

Harry's suggestion was instantly outvoted by his three friends and all the first years within hearing range. It seems he was stuck with that name.



"So, are we going to go along tonight?"

The other three thought over Neville's question and could come up with any reason not to. Between the ball and now this club, moral in the castle had rarely been higher.

-oOoOo-

Everyone left the great hall straight after dinner, there was no dawdling tonight. They understood the hall would need to be set up for the club, and on regaining entry it certainly looked promising. The house tables had been removed, and a duelling platform now dominated the hall.

All that early promise was for naught though with the discovery of just who was running this club.

"Gather round, gather round! Can everyone see me? Can you all hear me? Excellent!"

The loud groans that greeted Gilderoy's arrival told the professor he was the only one who thought this situation was 'excellent'.

"Now, Professor Dumbledore has granted me permission to start this little duelling club, to train you all in case you ever need to defend yourselves as I myself have done on countless occasions — for full details, see my published works."

He then rather grandiosely, in a move that must have seen him practicing in front of a mirror for hours, swirled his cape off his shoulders. Deliberately choosing a group of girls, he tossed his cape toward them - only to see it hit the floor as they all moved away from the item that had actually touched liar Lockhart.

Undaunted, the intrepid professor pushed on with the meeting.

"Now I would like to introduce the professor who has kindly agreed to assist me with this demonstration duel tonight. Professor Slughorn."

This was a surprise to just about everyone in the hall. No one knew what Slughorn was like with a wand in his hand, the unanimous

consensus though was that he couldn't possibly be worse than Lockhart.

The blowhard counted down from three, and then promptly ended up on his back - a simple disarming spell doing the damage. That this was met with loud cheering did more damage to Lockhart than his opponent's curse. He of course claimed to have let the curse through - purely for demonstration purposes - but no one was buying that anymore.

Slughorn seemed to take heart from the cheering, not realising it was more for Lockhart's defeat than the person inflicting it. Their next demonstration duel, the potions professor really went to town.

Within seconds, Gilderoy was dressed like a circus clown - complete with red nose and green frizzy hair - while trying his best to perform 'Riverdance' without music. He was waving his wand around more like a conductor of an orchestra rather than a wizard, Gilderoy would probably have gotten better results from the string section than he achieved trying to cast a counter spell.

What was riotously funny at the beginning was now becoming cringeworthy and decidedly unpleasant. There is a fine line between a prank and bullying, Slughorn was leaving that line far behind him. A silencing curse ended Gilderoy's pleas for the spells to be lifted, the defence professor was now entering a clear state of physical distress.

Horace was enjoying this, and now for phase two of his plan. "Oh dear, I can see why there is such a demand for private defence tuition. I just hope tomorrow night's lessons are better than this."

The first year were on him in seconds, defending 'Crow's Marauders', Ginny being especially vociferous. Harry used that distraction to cast a finite incantatem at Lockhart, drawing no pleasure from watching the now physically exhausted man collapse to the floor.

Slughorn turned his attention to Harry. "It would seem your charges are quite impressed with your defence teachings, centurion. Then again, they don't really have much to compare it with - do they?"

Hermione was muttering a warning to him, that she was speaking in his own language told Harry how serious she thought the situation

was. ""This is screaming set-up, and making me wonder just whose idea this club was.""

"What do you say, centurion, want to show us what you're teaching the first years? Let's have a friendly duel, you're bound to at least last longer than our current defence professor."

""He's deliberately goading you into fighting him, I just can't figure out why.""

""This might not be a bad idea, Hermione. I really need to get some idea what level I'm at, and he can't really go too far with all these witnesses...""

Horace wasn't getting the reaction he expected so goaded Harry some more. "Do you need your girlfriend's permission to duel? Is that what the problem is? Perhaps I should duel her instead, that might get your attention." He'd been expecting those comments to be accompanied by some derisive laughter, especially from his Slytherins. The entire school though had learned - some of them the hard way - that you don't anger Harry. The one sure way to do this was by targeting his girlfriend, Hermione.

Harry though was very calm as he answered the head of Slytherin. "You have been misinformed, professor. I don't teach the marauders how to duel, I teach them how to fight. If you wish to fight a centurion, I just happen to know one who will accommodate you."

Harry might be calm but Hermione was nervous enough for the both of them. ""Don't mess about, Harry, end it quickly!""

Horace was pleased his plan had worked, he needed to show he was so much more than the image the students now had of him. Dumping the boy-who-lived onto his arse would be his first step on the road to regaining some of the respect he had lost. "Certainly centurion, won't you join me up here?"

"As I said, professor, I don't duel. We'll ward off an area down here and the fight only finishes when someone is bleeding." Harry handed a stone to both Neville and Padma, before kissing Hermione and giving her a third. They then moved everyone back to clear a large space on the floor. Harry moved Luna, Ginny and Colin up on to the duelling stage so they could see more clearly, a move that

was soon copied by most of the lower school. When they had a large enough area cleared, they each placed a stone at a corner and activated them.

Harry kicked off his shoes and opened his shirt, Horace though was already playing mind games.

"Armour for a friendly duel, surely not?"

"This is a fight, professor, and there is nothing friendly about one of them. I can no more leave my armour off than you can discard all the years of experience you have over me. Like your experience, my armour is a part of me. Don't forget, you agreed to fight a centurion. I told you I am a centurion first, and a Hogwarts' student second."

Harry had his shield and knife ready before he drew his sword. "Count us off, Hermione."

Horace was now faced with this golden warrior, all trace of the boy he thought he was duelling seemed to vanish when that magnificent armour activated. He was beginning to suspect this might not be as easy as he thought when the girl set them off.

"First Blood - Fight!"

Harry's first stunner reverberated off the shield that Horace had hastily erected, that shield though was no protection from a blade. In a move that was almost as quick as his stunner, Harry was on Slughorn and sliced a chunk out of his robe.

The professor let out a yelp of surprise before managing to get a combination of spells off, they didn't do any good. Crow was so fast, dogging or deflecting every single one before that sword flashed and another chunk of his robes hit the floor.

Horace felt as if he was fighting for his life here, yet really couldn't use any of his heavier curses against a twelve year old boy - at least not with so many people watching. The third time Crow's blade had cut through his robes, the experienced dueller knew this boy could finish the fight anytime he wanted. This had changed from an opportunity for Horace to gain some respect to a training exercise for Crow, that could not be allowed to continue.

He'd bided his time and was now ready, a starburst charm should momentarily blind everyone in the hall, allowing Horace to cast the necessary spells to put Crow down. He clamped his eyes tight as the starburst illuminated the entire hall, but Horace never got time to put the rest of his plan into operation.

When Hermione's vision returned, she saw a knackered Harry leaning on his sword - and no sign of Slughorn. She deactivated her corner and rushed to him, throwing her arms around her mate to confirm he was okay.

"I thought I said not to mess about? He nearly had you on a few occasions."

"I wouldn't have learned anything ending it in seconds, and he was sticking to spells that wouldn't really hurt me."

Padma and Neville had also collapsed their corners and joined the couple. It was Padma of course who just had to ask the question. "So, what did you learn?"

"Not to mess about...ouch! No need to get violent ladies." Harry had just received a punch on each arm from both girls. Neville though had a different concern.

"Eh, Harry, where's Slughorn?"

Harry looked up, and his three friends were the first to burst into laughter as they followed his line of sight, they certainly weren't the last. Slughorn was dangling from the ceiling of the great hall, robes ripped to shreds and entrapped in a web. Everyone though could easily read his expression of disbelief as he cradled his bleeding wand hand.

"I barely scratched him, I wonder if old Sluggy is afraid of heights?"

Roger had made some pretty outrageous claims about the defence classes these four attended at the weekend, not one Ravenclaw doubted his word now. Cedric had also stated in Hufflepuff that any of the four would kick his arse in a fight, and Harry regularly fought the other three - all at the same time. Susan and Hannah's claims that Harry and Hermione practiced every day, even on holiday, had

also been taken with a pound of salt. These too were now being believed.

Even the first year Gryffindors knew not to believe a word Fred and George said, their house did know a fighter when they saw one though - and Harry was undoubtedly a fighter.

The Slytherins didn't know what to think. Their head of house had deliberately goaded Crow into a fight - and then lost. Anyone who'd seen him use either of his blades knew Harry could have cut Slughorn with any of those strokes that sliced through his robes. This seemed to send a mixed message. There was certainly no love lost between Crow and Lockhart, it didn't escape their notice though that Harry had just dished out the same treatment their head of house gave Lockhart earlier. One thing was for sure, no one would openly challenge Crow after that display.

The prefects had to step in and stop the great hall from descending into chaos. With Lockhart now sleeping from exhaustion - he snored too - and Slughorn hanging from the ceiling, they were forced to take charge. The ruckus Harry's victory had started was bound to attract staff attention, with McGonagall and Flitwick soon arriving and demanding some answers.

There was no shortage of people willing to supply those answers and soon McGonagall had only one question for Harry. "Centurion, how long do you intend to leave Professor Slughorn up there?"

"Professor Slughorn didn't seem in any hurry to remove his Tarantallegra from Professor Lockhart. He left him dancing so I see no reason not to leave the good professor dangling. Excuse us, professor, but it's been a long and tiring day - with tomorrow probably being longer still since we have our defence club. I'm heading off to bed now."

They walked out of the great hall, leaving both professors to restore order - and also deal with a swinging Slughorn and snoring Lockhart. Neville and Hermione were practically carrying Harry by the time they reached Ravenclaw tower, goodnights were said as Neville then escorted Ginny and Colin back to their own dorm.

Luna found herself sitting with Moonlight at Harry's feet, Padma and Hermione had plonked him between them on a sofa. Luna was

delighted her friends trusted her enough to discuss what was going on in front of her.

"I've never used my armour to enhance my speed for so long before, it really drained me. I think it's something that I might need to build up some endurance to."

Padma agreed with his assessment "Magic will always extract a price, why didn't you end it sooner though?"

"it didn't really hit me until the fight was over, that's the scary part. If I had continued, would I have just dropped from exhaustion?"

"Harry Crow, you will not be practicing that!"

"I think I need to, Hermione, it could prove vital in a fight." He could see the scared look in her eyes and made a concession. "I promise I won't attempt it without supervision and have at least one healer present."

Hermione could see this was something he would need to get a handle on, that Harry was going to do it as responsibly as possible was really the best she could ask for.

They got Harry up the stairs before he fell asleep on the sofa. Hermione did offer to take a morning off from their exercises but Harry wouldn't hear of it. A quick kiss goodnight and he collapsed on top of the bed.

"Shouldn't we undress him?"

"Padma Patil, get your thoughts off my Harry. I'm throwing a cover on him, that will keep him warm until morning."

Padma was in full teasing mode now. "You could stay with him? No one would know."

Hermione was pleased to see her friend returning to something like her normal self, Padma's relationship with her sister could currently be described at best as 'strained'. "That's precisely why I won't be staying. When I spend the night with Harry, I at least like him to know I'm there."

Padma had no answer to that so both witches headed back down to the common room, stopping to watch as Luna attempted to teach Moonlight how to play hide and seek.

-oOoOo-

Harry was almost back to normal next morning, though the couple did knock a few miles off their run. At breakfast, Harry found himself receiving vicious glares from the Hogwarts potions professor, it was almost as if something he'd been missing had returned. He much preferred the glares to the covetous stares Slughorn normally aimed at him.

Breakfast also saw Harry face a barrage of questions - and even more requests for defence tutoring - he held up his hand to gain some quiet to be allowed a chance to answer. "First off, Slughorn was holding back. He couldn't really go full power against a second year student. In a real fight, I think you would see a different approach." This set the Ravenclaws thinking, though Harry knew they wouldn't like the next part.

"Working out lesson plans for the first years is taking nearly as long as teaching them - and they are all at the same level. To try and run another class couldn't fail but have an impact on our own studies. I'm sorry but it has to be a no to more defence lessons. Roger and the other three are being tutored by Assistant Ambassador Weasley and again, increasing the size of that class would seriously cut into our lesson."

The one thing about Ravenclaws was that they could see the logic behind Harry's reasoning, none of them would endanger their own studying or grades to tutor others. They may understand Harry's reasoning but that didn't mean they had to like his decision.

They had defence after lunch and once more the four stayed behind to run over their plans for tonight's defence club. Bill though was more interested in Harry's exhaustion.

"We all noticed you were knackered after fighting Master Sharpshard, but you were wounded too! This is something your father needs to hear about, and I really do think we need to find your limits." Bill headed Hermione's objections off with simple logic. "It's



much safer to discover what those limits are under test conditions than in a battle."

None of them could really argue with that.

-oOoOo-

By the time they were due to meet 'crow's marauders', Harry's exhaustion was nothing more than a memory and the four friends were all raring to go.

"You all did really well last week but tonight we're going to change it up a level. We noticed that some people weren't concentrating on their evasion, prepared to take a hit to get their own spell off. That is never the way to behave in a fight. The curse that you let hit might be the last thing you'll ever feel." Harry let the seriousness of this sink in before continuing.

"Because of this we're going to learn a new spell tonight. It's called the stinging hex, any idea why?"

Ginny was first with an answer, she'd seen her mum fire it at the twins for years - usually as they were running away from the mayhem they'd just created. "That's because it stings when you get hit with it."

"Ginny's exactly right. It does sting people, but it won't do you any harm other than that. The secret will be not to let it hit you, and we want you to learn to treat all spells cast at you in the same manner."

After having learned to cast the blob spell, no one had any trouble mastering the stinging hex. Then the real lesson began. Harry had asked the room for some protective headgear, a stinging curse to the face was not something they wanted any of the first years to experience.

"You are now going to take part in an exercise the four of us do all the time. Same teams as last week, one will be casting the stinging hex while the other will be doing their best to evade. There will be a strict time limit of one minute, when we call time - you'd better stop casting! If you get hit, lie down on the floor and you will not be targeted again."

There was a much more serious atmosphere about the lesson tonight. Even the ones doing the casting knew it would be their turn to evade next. Harry and Neville kept their eyes on the casting team, while Hermione, Padma and Henrica looked after those evaders who'd been hit. There was no cheering from the sidelines this time, everyone was too busy watching for ideas that would see them come out of this without being stung.

Hermione made sure to be the one who led Colin to the sidelines after his team's minute was up, he would probably have looked upon Padma having her arm around his shoulders as a price worth paying for taking a stinging hex.

Once each team had their turn at both exercises, Harry reintroduced the format they had used last week - only this time using stinging hexes. All were pleased to see the battles this time were a lot more cagey, no one wanted to rush into a brace of stinging hexes.

At the end of the lesson, they had all the 'marauders' sit in a large circle and the elves provided comforting mugs of hot chocolate for each of them.

Harry then spoke to the class. "Up until tonight we've tried to make these lessons fun. The downside of that approach was some of you were treating it all as a game - I hope you now know it's not. We will still try and have some fun but you have to understand that learning to defend yourselves is a very serious business. You are witches and wizards - a wand in your hand gives you the power to perform magic. The point of this club is to teach you how to do that properly and responsibly. We realised tonight might be a bit of a shock to the system and hope you'll still be back next week."

They had worried that tonight's approach might scare a few of them off, Luna though seemed to speak for all of them. "Why wouldn't we come back next week? This is stuff we need to learn and who else is going to teach us it - Professor Lockhart? You are giving up your evening for us, and I know you'll be studying for Master Pitslay's class the minute you get back to our common room. I think what I'm trying to say is thanks, to all of you."

They weren't sure who started clapping but soon all the first years were applauding their four tutors and staff sponsor. The first years

had taken to wearing their 'Crow's Marauders' badges on their robes and Harry couldn't help but feel proud of what they were doing here.

-oOoOo-

It was fear rather than pride that saw Lucius shoot up into a sitting position in bed, the nightmare had left him sweating. Draco and Pansy had been in the picture that appeared on the Prophet's front page, just two of many purebloods who were clearly having a good time. Lucius was the only person who knew that those good times were going to come to a crashing halt - and that the pictures he saw in his nightmare were of dead pureblood children. That Draco's face was amongst those dead children was the reason for his nightmare - that and his inability to do anything about the situation. His son was just going to have to be left to take his chances - along with the rest of Hogwarts.

A/N Thanks for reading.

## Chapter 42

September gave way to October as the school year marched on relentlessly. Adding the four older boys to their Sunday training was paying dividends all round. The fourth years were getting sick of ending up on the floor every time they fought and continually pushed themselves harder to put a stop to this occurrence. Their efforts kept the four friends on their toes, and also working harder to maintain their current one hundred percent record.

As they were leaving the room of requirements, Harry had a question for the older wizards. "How would you four like to give us a hand with the marauders on Tuesday night? We're planing on trying to teach them how to cast a shield charm and the smaller the group we can work with, the better it will be for them."

Cedric was astonished at this. "You're teaching first years the protego charm?"

Padma seemed to think their teaching methods were being questioned here. "What's wrong with that? We learned it last year when we were their age..."

"Easy Padma, Cedric didn't mean anything." Hermione then went on to explain their reasoning to the fourth years. "The shield charm is one of the most important we learn at Hogwarts, we just don't see any reason to wait until third or fourth year before tackling it. Professor Weasley taught it to us earlier than this last year."

Harry confirmed what his girlfriend had just said. "Hermione's right, it makes no sense. Yes they will need to be older to cast a powerful shield but learning it now should make that part easier. We're only aiming for a shield that will stop a stinging hex, a stinging hex cast by a fellow first year."

It was a thoughtful Roger who replied. "That actually is so logical I can't fault it. Starting them off now will mean they've already mastered the spell for when they're older - why isn't it taught earlier?"

It was the twins who jumped in with an answer to that. "Hey, we've got Lockhart, remember."

"Yeah, does anyone here think that prat can actually cast a shield?"

"You'll get no takers for that, see you guys at lunch." Neville gave Padma's arm a reassuring squeeze before he and the twins headed into their dorm.

Padma then took the opportunity to apologise. "Sorry for snapping at you, Cedric. The marauders is about the only thing in my life that's going well at the moment, I thought you were criticising the club."

"No problem, Padma, and I'll be delighted to help out any time you'll let me."

As the two witches headed up the stairs, a shower and change of clothes being required before lunch, Hermione broached what she knew would be a touchy subject. "Have you made your mind up yet?"

The slump in Padma's shoulders indicated how hard this was for the girl. "Mum wrote back and advised me to go. I haven't been able to discuss it with Parvati since she barely speaks to me now. Lavender says she also rarely sees Parvati now, she thinks my sister is hanging about with Blaise. Why wouldn't she tell me that she had a boyfriend? Blaise seems a nice enough guy, a bit stuck-up but still nice."

Hermione now had her arm around her best friend, Padma enjoyed the comfort before voicing her decision. "I've decided just to go. Staying here without you three and Pav not talking to me would just be too much. We're going to be some bunch, between the three of you worried about your parents and me my sister, it'll be some Halloween celebration."

This drew faint smiles from both girls before Hermione's thoughts turned to someone else. "I think Luna will miss us too, she's offered to watch Moonlight for me. Since I won't be going home, I said yes."

"She's as attached to that cat as you are, perhaps we should think about getting her one for her birthday?"

Hermione was now shaking her head at Padma's suggestion. "Don't mention that around Harry, he's practically adopted the girl - and

Moonlight would be so jealous of another cat sharing Luna's affections."

Both knew what Harry was like with birthdays, he just loved seeing someone's face light up when they opened the gift they'd just been given.

-oOoOo-

Neville felt he'd been given a gift when Padma confirmed she'd be spending the Halloween weekend with them. None of her three friends had wanted to put any pressure on her since all would have loved to have a sibling. "That's brilliant! My gran says mum is making steady process, with my dad a bit slower. I have no idea what that means and can't wait to see for myself. Professor Weasley will take us straight to Gringotts after our defence lesson on Friday. We'll see my mum and dad, and then visit Harry's parents on the Saturday."

Padma felt it was wrong to feel excited when her relationship with her twin sister had deteriorated so badly, but Neville's enthusiasm was infectious.

"My gran also wanted to see our training so Professor Weasley will be giving us a lesson on the Sunday morning. I get the feeling she is up to something but I don't know what."

"My father hasn't mentioned anything but that means nothing, goblins are unreadable - except to Hermione here."

Padma made an effort to tease. "Oh I think it's just a specific goblin our Hermione can read."

The witch in question now snaked her arm around Harry's waist. "Trying to understand one goblin is more than enough for me."

-oOoOo-

Minerva had decided she needed to check out the first year defence club, otherwise known as Crow's Marauders. It was soon easy to see why they had that name. Henrica quickly welcomed them, taking time to introduce the quartet of fourth years who would be helping

them tonight, before handing the club over to Harry and then standing next to Minerva as a spectator.

The first year students hung on Harry's every word as he clearly and concisely laid out exactly what would be happening during tonight's lesson. Minerva thought he was being hugely ambitious with his aims but decided to keep that to herself, she would observe and make any comments after the lesson finished.

The first years were then split into four groups, Minerva couldn't miss that they had deliberately avoided splitting them along house lines. Watching Fred Weasley work alongside Harry with his group was certainly an eye-opener for his head of house. Here was a seriousness and willingness to help that totally surprised Minerva, that it was matched by his twin working with Hermione was nothing short of astonishing. If these two weren't careful, they could find themselves in the running for a prefect badge at the summer. Now there was something Minerva couldn't have imagined, even this time last year.

She also noticed Miss Patil working seamlessly with Mr Diggory. While most of the younger witches in Hogwarts might wish for the wizarding company she kept, Padma paid that part no notice and just got on with the job in hand. She was so focused that Mr Diggory followed her orders without question, which would probably only widen the rift between her and Parvati when this got out.

The pairing that pleased Minerva the most though was Neville and Mr Davies. It was obvious that her lion was in charge, and again the older boy obeyed his instructions. The first years' too were quick to obey any instructions given. Two would be called forward, practice the spell a few times and then return to their group, with words of encouragement ringing in their ears.

Minerva was one of the few aware of what was happening with his parents, she had signed the forms allowing these four to leave the school for the Halloween weekend. Minerva swore if they returned to Hogwarts with good news, she would gladly raise a wee dram herself in celebration.

A student working with George Weasley was the first to complete a shield. It was so weak, a sneeze would have brought it down. The

girl though received a round of applause from the entire class, and you could see the determination growing amongst the rest.

Harry stopped the lesson early and the first years appeared to know what was coming next, they all sat on the floor in a big circle as mugs of hot chocolate appeared for each of them.

"So very well done tonight, and those who didn't quite manage it - don't worry because we'll be keeping at it. In Hogwarts, the shield charm is taught at the end of third year - so we're already two and a half years ahead of schedule. For those who managed it, fantastic! We will continue to practice that spell every week, it's easily one of the most important that you will learn at Hogwarts. Shields are like muscles, the more you use them - the stronger they will get. Before Christmas break, we plan to have everyone not only casting shields but using them in a fight. Any questions?"

A few were asked and handled by different members of the team. Harry then called time and they got ready to leave. The older boys escorted the first years back to their dorms, leaving the four friends time to talk with both professors.

"I have to say that is one of the most effective defence lessons I've seen taught at Hogwarts for many a year."

Neville was left blushing at the unaccustomed, and he felt undeserved, praise from his head of house. "Professor, we're just passing on what we were taught. This is how Professor Weasley teaches us every weekend, he and Professor Hobson even help us prepare each lesson."

Minerva was even more pleased to hear that. Any other second year students in their position would be lording it over their classmates, but not these four. "I have been teaching here for many years, Mr Longbottom, and I could easily see the adult hands that had guided your lesson. It was you four though that stood in front of students, students you're barely a year older than yourselves, and pulled that lesson off in a fashion that would have Lockhart writing another book about how he'd tamed the marauding hoard of vicious pigmies."

Henrica was the first to crack, her musical laughter reverberating around the now nearly empty room and making it okay for the others



to laugh. Padma though had an apt title for this new publication. "Liar Lockhart and the Phoney Pigmies - it has a nice ring to it!"

Even McGonagall laughed at that, though she would probably deny it if the feat was mentioned outside this room.

-oOoOo-

Padma had tried all week to talk to Parvati but her twin either ignored her or couldn't be found. She was tempted to ask Harry for a loan of his map but that would have felt too much like spying on her sister, something there was no recovering from. She had to settle for sending a letter by a Hogwarts owl.

Henrica was waiting on the four friends when the second year defence class finished, she was going to accompany them and Bill to Gringotts. Padma had clothes for her and Hermione inside the bag Harry gave her while Harry's own bag held a few changes for himself. Neville was staying in his own home so didn't really need anything. He practically ran out of the Hogwarts gates and was impatient for everyone else to catch-up, Neville had never wanted to be somewhere else so much in his entire life.

-oOoOo-

Standing in front of the door, Neville felt his courage falter. His gran had greeted them with tears in her eyes before directing the quartet here. Neville had never seen her like that before - those tears could mean anything. Padma's hand slipping into his steadied the nervousness that threatened to run away with him. That's how Neville entered the room, holding Padma's hand with his two friends right behind him. With that support, Neville felt as if he could face anything.

The emotional spike he felt after walking through that door was unprecedented, Neville felt as if his heart was going to explode right out of his chest.

His mother recognised him, there was no doubt of that in his mind.

She then smiled at him, here was physical proof he'd been right - she did recognise him.

When his mother slowly opened her arms and held them out toward him, Neville stopped breathing. Padma's hand slipped out of his and provided a gentle push in the back, that was all Neville needed. He couldn't for the life of him remember how he got there but Neville would remember to his dying day the sensation of his mother's arms closing around him in a hug.

It took him a moment to realise that the sobs he heard were his own but Neville didn't care, his mother's hand moving up and stroking his head started to calm him down. It was only then that Neville remembered the other person he'd come to see. Again, his father was looking straight at him and again, Neville would swear there was recognition in his eyes too. The hug with his dad may not have been returned but Neville now felt like the luckiest wizard on the planet, then his manners kicked in.

He returned to his mother and wondered how to handle the introductions, it came to him with a smile. "Mum, this is Harry, your godson."

Harry was almost as emotional as Neville had been when Alice hugged him, only Hermione then being introduced as his girlfriend held him together.

As Hermione joined Harry, Neville noticed Padma hanging back. That wasn't happening today. He reached for her hand and brought her forward with him. "Mum, dad, this is Padma."

Alice reached out and placed her hand on their joined ones. Her smile was wide as she attempted to speak. "Boo...ti...ful."

Neville's heart soared as he answered his mother. "Yes, she is." He would swear his father was nodding in agreement.

In the next room, there was hardly a dry eye there either. The large one-way wall allowed them to see and hear everything that went on in the room. Augusta's smile was beaming as the tears slowly ran down her cheeks. "I need to get them out of there soon, Frank and Alice can only take excitement in small doses, otherwise it might affect their treatment."

The room's occupants watched as Augusta left and entered the other room to explain this to the youngsters. "Neville, your mum and

dad have been looking forward to your visit all week. We need to keep it short though, too much excitement can set their treatment back. We will return tomorrow, and again on Sunday before you leave for the castle."

Neville wanted to stay with his mum and dad all night, but not if it hindered their recovery. He also got to hug them goodnight.

They made it out the door and Neville grabbed Harry by the shoulders. "Harry, I... I..."

Harry was soon returning the gesture. "Neville, I got to hug my godmother. There are no words, and certainly no thanks needed. We're family, remember."

All four of them were very close so couldn't fail to be affected by the emotional scene they'd just been a part of. Both witches gently took a wizard by the arm and led them through the door where Augusta had just gone, only to discover a surprise waiting on them too. When Hermione saw her parents waiting for her in the room, she was actually frozen in place. Padma shooting past her into Smita's arms soon saw Hermione repeating those actions as she almost bowled her parents over with the force of her desperate hug.

A tearful Henrica soon had both boys wrapped in a hug too. "Neville, I am so happy for you. That was without a doubt the most heartwarming thing I have ever seen."

Augusta then moved both boys over to the wall that allowed them to see into the room. "We can't go in there too often, or for too long, but Barchoke arranged this so I can visit whenever I want."

Neville couldn't take his eyes off his parents, just watching his mum sitting holding his dad's hand was like witnessing a miracle. Sirius and Henrica came up behind them. "I've booked a room at the Leaky Cauldron again so we can all eat dinner together. There's no hurry though, I could watch this all night."

Padma was crying in her mother's arms. "Parvati won't even speak to me now, I don't know what else to do, mum. I would have stayed in the castle if I thought it would help.."

Smita had Padma wrapped in a hug, her daughters had little spats before but nothing on a scale like this. "I wrote to her and asked if she wanted to come home for the weekend, and even hinted that there were other things going on she wouldn't want to miss. She said she was happy to stay in the castle and enjoy the celebrations there. I got the distinct impression I wasn't being told the whole truth."

"Her date for the ball was Blaise Zabini, a Slytherin but a gentleman too. I don't know if she's still seeing him, we have hardly spoken since that night."

Her dad then had some advice. "It's only seven weeks until the holidays, and Parvati will certainly be coming home in December. We will sit down and discuss what's going on then, I promise we will get to the bottom of this." The Patils headed over to join their friends watching Frank and Alice.

Hermione was also in tears, attempting to apologise to her father. Emma left the two for a moment, heading over to Harry and Neville.

Harry felt the arms wrap around him from behind and knew instantly who it was, Emma then kissed him on the cheek. "Are you okay, Harry?"

"I've rarely felt better, Emma. I have a godfather, and a godmother!"

She then hugged Neville, there was no need to ask the same question though - the boy was practically floating with happiness.

Augusta was suffering from the same condition, she had some startling news for them though. "That's the first word your mother has spoken, I didn't expect that today."

This got Neville's attention, especially what that word was - and who it was aimed at. His hand almost automatically reaching out for Padma's.

They were then joined by Hermione and her dad, though it was Dan who spoke. "Harry, can I have a quiet word?"

Harry didn't answer, just nodding his head and moving over to a quiet bit of the room - all without taking his eyes off his godmother.

This clearly wasn't the best of times but Dan needed to get this off his chest. "Harry, what I saw here tonight redefines what family means, and why that should be so important to all of us. I want to apologise for my actions that night, I certainly never intended to hurt you - or Hermione. I would like to do now what I should have done that night and welcome you to the family - that is if you want to join?"

Harry now gave Dan his full attention. His expression didn't change though as he was already sporting a wide grin. "I would like that, Dan, I would like that a lot." His hand was out and Dan shook it, before leading Harry back over to where everyone was still standing.

It was Augusta who finally called time. "We need to go and eat. Neville, we will be back tomorrow."

They left the room to find Barchoke waiting on them, Neville approached the goblin immediately. "Ambassador Barchoke, anything you wish from the Longbottom family is yours for the asking."

"Neville, your friendship with my son is more than enough for me. Watching your parents slowly emerge from their cocoons is a wondrous thing for us too. Our healers are learning so much, and Dan has arranged more scans over the December holidays."

A beaming Harry stepped forward and saluted. "Well met, father. I am really pleased to see you again."

Hermione also stepped beside Harry and greeted Barchoke in his own language. ""Well met, father. Your daughter is also delighted to see you once more.""

Barchoke had deliberately not been present when Harry met his godmother, it wasn't seemly for a goblin of his standing to have tears in his eyes. His daughter almost undid all those preparations with her greeting. ""Well met, my children."" He then switched to English. "Shall we go eat?"

It was only after leaving that room they all realised just how hungry they were, no one had eaten since lunch so Barchoke's suggestion got a resounding yes.

Hermione was of course on Harry's arm but pushed him forward so they were walking next to Barchoke. She needed a word with him. "Sir, my wonderful mate gifted me one of Rowena Ravenclaw's workbooks for my birthday. I have been studying the charm that allows your language to be understood and think I can cast it. Do I need permission from the nation before attempting it?"

The goblin almost stumbled as the implications of that hit home. Master Flitwick had sworn on his honour to the Lady Ravenclaw he would cast the spell only once, and never pass it on to anyone else, now his daughter not only had knowledge of the spell but could cast it. The implications of this would have to be taken to the director, though it would be prudent to ensure she was correct first.

"Who did you plan on testing this on?"

"Padma, Neville, Henrica, Sirius and Professor Weasley. I would like to add my mum and dad to that list but don't know if it would work on people without magic."

Those names were what Barchoke would have predicted, and could easily justify them to the director as test cases. "Henrica and my Assistant Ambassador would certainly benefit from understanding our language, I also see no problem with Sirius being included too. It would certainly give you four a tactical advantage if you could all speak a language your opponents couldn't. I would leave your parents until we could try it under test conditions, much like we'll need to do with Harry's exhaustion from magically enhancing his armour."

Hermione didn't disagree with any of that, and Barchoke's final suggestion made sense too.

"I will need to approach the director to discuss the implications of this, but I would advise you not to let anyone else know of that spell - and certainly not how to cast it."

-oOoOo-

Remus had been well warned that anything he heard here today was not for repeating outside 'the family'. As Remus listened to Harry telling James and Lily what he'd been up to, the marauder felt

that Sirius' warning was unnecessary - no one would ever believe him.

Harry introducing Hermione as his mate was the first body-blow, and saw the werewolf looking around for confirmation. Barchoke and the Grangers were standing with smiles on their faces, his first hint this was all true. Sirius had his arm wrapped around Henrica, taking comfort from his girlfriend at this bittersweet scene. The last two members of 'the family' present today were Neville and Padma, leaving Remus to assume their parents and guardians didn't know the half of this.

That Remus himself was included left him feeling really honoured. As Harry chatted to his parents, Remus swore to James and Lily he would do anything and everything in his power to help their son - and his family. The marauder suspected Sirius was silently doing the same too.

Neville was holding onto Padma's hand like a drowning man grasps a lifeline. Harry was so animated and upbeat yet Neville felt a great sense of loss just watching his friend. As bad as things had been for him personally, he always had his gran and could at least see his parents. All Harry had were some names carved into a slab of marble. Realising this was also his godmother too saw Neville step forward. With Padma holding his hand, he was able to say hello to his godmother and talk a bit about himself and his three friends.

Barchoke observed the scene with a hint of melancholy, thinking back to when it would be just him and Harry spending a few hours here. He much preferred this arrangement though, knowing his son always wanted a family. The goblin couldn't help but think his son was building himself a good one here, with siblings, favourite uncles and parents being drafted in. Emma may be smiling on the outside but Barchoke thought he knew her well enough to see past that mask. Inside, Emma was hurting for her children.

Augusta's party tonight would be a welcome break, and something everyone was looking forward to. As an avid observer of people, Barchoke had watched as the barriers between their extended group had slowly eroded over time - even the Patils had changed and become more relaxed around the company. Augusta herself had lost a lot of her straight-laced mannerisms when amongst this group,

she'd been more animated and louder than Sirius at their dinner last night - a feat that was worthy of a celebration all to itself.

-oOoOo-

Neville's second short visit with his parents acted as confirmation that his first hadn't been just a wonderful dream. Again his gran had let the four friends visit by themselves, keeping the number of visitors down to a minimum. He was getting ready for tonight's party when there was a knock on his bedroom door, answering found his three friends standing there.

"Can we talk for a few minutes, Neville, Hermione has something that she wants to keep just between the four of us at the moment."

Neville stood back to let them in, a quick glance at Padma telling him that she didn't know what Harry was talking about either. Hermione didn't keep them waiting for long.

"I've been studying Rowena's workbook, especially the charm that translates the goblin language. It's complicated wand work but doesn't require a massive amount of power. I'm pretty sure I can cast it and wondered if you two wanted the ability to understand and speak goblin too?"

Padma caught on quickest. "Is that why you were chatting to Barchoke in goblin? I don't know if it's just my nosey side showing but the idea of being able to understand what's being said by the goblins appeals to me."

Neville approached the thing from a whole different angle. "Professor Weasley says when we're older, we'll learn silent casting so the opposition doesn't know what spells we cast. What if we cast them in goblin? Will that even work?"

This led Hermione and Harry to look at one another, leading to a simultaneous shrugging of shoulders. Harry drew his knife and cast *lumos*, first in English/Latin then his own language, the charm worked equally for both.

Hermione was biting her bottom lip in deep thought before offering an explanation. "Professor Weasley is always telling us our magic is



intent based, Harry's magic obviously understands what he's trying to cast - so just does it."

"We could cast our spells and no one would have a clue what was coming at them! This will seriously piss off our sparring partners next weekend. Hermione, I certainly want to have a go at this." Padma was putting her name at the top of the very short queue, Neville quickly agreed to join it too.

It was a nervous Hermione who then got her book and wand out, it was now time to see if she could live up to her claim.

Padma wasn't nervous in the least, knowing her friend would never have offered if she wasn't certain of success. A tense few moments was then followed by Harry asking Padma how she felt, in goblin. That she answered in the same language saw each witch's feet suddenly being lifted off the ground, Harry letting out a loud whoop as he twirled Hermione in the air.

Hermione glanced down at the love and pride reflected back from Harry, before she noticed their two friends. Neville had Padma in a similar position and the two were gazing happily at each other. The spell seemed to break and Neville lowered her gently to the ground before turning to Hermione in an effort to hide his blush from Padma.

"I'm ready when you are, Hermione."

She took a moment to centre herself again, this was not a spell you could do in a hurry. It was only minutes later though that all four were chatting excitedly in goblin.

"Oh, I can't wait to use this on Fred and George. This is better than a prank!" The thought of getting one over on the biggest pranksters in the school had Neville almost drooling at the thought.

Padma though had bigger fish to fry. "Why settle for the copies when we'll have the two originals here tomorrow. Everyone is staying after the party and tomorrow would be a fabulous opportunity for Robin, Dove, Owl and Swift of Crow's Marauders to match up to Padfoot and Mooney."

This idea made Hermione nervous. "Eh, Padma, you do know that Remus is a master in defence - and Sirius is no slouch either."

"It's like Harry and Slughorn, Hermione, there's no way they will be using anything too powerful against us - embarrassing most definitely. We need a better measure of where we are, it actually wouldn't be a bad thing if we got our arses kicked. That's the result everyone will expect anyway, so we've nothing to lose."

Harry agreed with Padma. "You have to fight people better than you to improve. Roger, Cedric and the twins are just beginning to get the idea of fighting against us as a team, Sirius and Remus will have that down pat. Casting our spells in goblin might give us a bit of a shock advantage, but we would have to take it quickly."

It was Neville who brought up another problem. "How do we convince them into fighting us in the first place?"

That saw the four of them put their heads together.

-oOoOo-

Running around the Longbottom estate was a pleasant change for Harry and Hermione. Last night's party had been great but just the two of them running alongside the estate's boundaries on a sharp November morning was wonderful in a whole different way.

"I take it you noticed how much closer Neville and Padma are getting." Hermione knew Harry missed very little.

Her mate confirmed that view. "I also noticed the big grins Augusta and Smita were wearing too! I can't believe Parvati is jealous over this, I thought she'd sorted that over the holidays. You don't see Susan or Hannah throwing a strop because those two are getting closer. Both those witches have known Neville a lot longer and might have fancied stepping in there themselves."

"Yeah, I now wonder how much she did change, or did we just see what we wanted?"

Harry was shaking his head at that. "Padma wouldn't be so upset if she didn't think Parvati had changed. Whatever it is, the problem will only get worse if Neville asks Padma to be his girlfriend."

Hermione shuddered at the idea of it getting worse, she knew how much their friend was hurting now.

They decided on one more lap before breakfast. Their training would be followed by lunch and then heading off to Gringotts, one last visit with Alice and Frank before returning to Hogwarts for dinner. It had been an emotional roller coaster of a weekend. For Hermione, getting to dance with her father last night had finally drawn a line under the nightmare her bonding with Harry had caused. She felt her family would eventually be stronger after this. For Harry, getting a hug from his godmother put him on cloud nine, and he hadn't come down all weekend.

-oOoOo-

The four soon forgot their audience as training required their undivided attention. Bill worked them hard, giving them two new spells to master, a shot with the duelling dummies and then shield drills.

As they were taking a breather, Padma asked a question. "Professor Weasley, can we get some of our audience to help us, since the boys aren't here?"

Bill's eyebrow rose at this, he was after all the twins' older brother. "What did you have in mind?"

"Well, my dad is there, Remus, Sirius and Henrica. We've gotten used to the workout of a four on four fight to finish our Sunday session."

Ramrao jumped in right away, as Padma had predicted he would. "Sorry, I could never raise my wand against my daughter. I'm going to have to decline."

Henrica was next with her answer. "It took those four wizards a month to be fit enough to come back down to lunch after a Sunday session with you lot - and they're all Quidditch players on their house teams. I'm going to pass this kind invitation."

The four then turned their attention onto the marauders, Sirius was certainly up for the challenge. "Well Moony, do you think we can teach these pups a lesson?"

"I get the feeling that was their intention all along. Don't take this too lightly, Sirius, getting your arse kicked by your godson and his friends is not something you can live down."

The six then squared off as Barchoke was offering odds on the four winning, Henrica felt honour bound to take that bet. The audience were all looking forward to a show, they wouldn't be disappointed.

When Bill counted them in, the quartet executed their plan flawlessly. Harry had his armour activated, his job was to keep Remus occupied. The other three all targeted Sirius in a blitzkrieg of spells cast in goblin, they were also constantly on the move and trying to outflank their opponent.

Right from the off, Sirius knew he was in trouble. These three weren't allowing him to get any spells off, all his efforts were having to be channeled into surviving this onslaught. He also had no idea what they were so accurately casting at him, which was pretty disconcerting. When Padma got around his shield, Sirius was forced to roll away from her spell - straight into Neville. Sirius was out of the fight.

Remus was using his werewolf reflexes to stay just ahead of Harry, but even then it was very close. When the other three turned their attention to him, Remus thought it was only a matter of time.

Barchoke was laughing until he saw Sirius get back up, and noticed their tutor putting his wand away. Dan had also seen this and was not amused. "That's cheating!"

The goblin understood what was happening here and put his hand on the angry father's arm. "In a fight, there's no such thing. Better they learn that lesson here, than in a real fight. Death eaters and their master don't know the meaning of fair, and will use every dirty trick they can."

Neville going down to a stunner from behind was the first clue they had that Sirius was back in the fight, Hermione's armour saved her from being the second to be taken out by the sneak attack.

Harry shouted orders in his own language and the girls instantly obeyed. Hermione drew her sword and charged Sirius, her wand still

spitting curses as she raced toward him. Sirius was shielding and dodging, especially from that blade. Her charge took Hermione past Sirius and he cast one of the marauders' speciality curses at her hopefully unprotected legs, she was now dangling in the air by her ankle.

He quickly turned to face Padma and made the same mistake the kids had earlier, Sirius forgot all about the wizard on the ground. Padma had revived Neville but he'd played possum and bided his time. As the witch allowed Sirius to push her back, in the direction Padma wanted to go, Neville had a free shot at the marauder's unprotected back.

Neville grabbed a stunned Sirius' wand while Padma got Hermione down, all three raced to help Harry before he overtaxed himself.

Barchoke was concerned about the same thing and considered shouting time until the four rounded on Remus once more.

Harry had been struggling to contain Remus, here was an opponent that was miles better than Slughorn - and throwing things at him that the Centurion certainly wanted to learn. When it was once more four against one, Harry wanted to end it. Trusting the people here, he cast an overpowered disarming spell with his sword.

With the battering Remus' shield was taking, the unexpected spell blasted right through and flung him back about ten feet - with his wand heading in the other direction. Padma had him trussed up seconds after he hit the ground - to loud cheering from the people watching.

Henrica revived her boyfriend and Sirius released a groan, he wasn't in pain though. "They beat us, didn't they?"

"Yes, and I should know better than to bet against a goblin. I lost ten galleons on you Black, and I'm back to Hogwarts later so I can't even make you pay for it."

There were congratulations being handed out and the ribbing had already started against the marauders but Bill's lesson wasn't over yet. "Okay you four, where did we go wrong?"

Neville was first to hold his hand up. "I should have taken Sirius' wand off him the first time, then it wouldn't have mattered if he'd been revived."

Bill then turned his attention to Harry, he had no idea what their tutor was after though. It was soon spelled out to the centurion by the angry redhead. "What the hell was that all about? Using Hermione as some kind of sacrificial goat so Sirius wouldn't see what Padma was up to. I thought better of you than that, risking one of your own to win a fight. In a real fight, you could have gotten her killed..." It was his job to push Harry into being ready to face Voldemort. For an instant, Bill thought he'd pushed too far - Harry appeared ready to attack him.

"That was our godfather she was up against, someone we knew would never hurt her. If you think I would try that in a real fight then we need a new tutor. This was an elaborate ruse to take down the marauders, we worked out our tactics last night. Yes, we counted heavily on them holding back, but so were we!"

At that, Harry drew his sword in one smooth motion and a powerful curse left the blade. They had been practicing in a walled area of garden behind Longbottom Manor, Harry had fired at the most distant wall - over thirty yards away - and his spell obliterated a section about fifteen feet across.

In the shocked silence that followed the loud blast, Dan's words were easily heard - though barely understood. "Shit! That's not a rifle, it's a bloody cannon."

The sword of Gryffindor returned to its sheath as Harry spoke again. "I know what I have to do, which is why Halloween is the only day of the year I don't train. Balls and parties are nice but, if they affected my training I wouldn't be there. These three have known the danger being my friend brought since the first week we met. They not only accepted it but wanted to train alongside me. I swear to everyone here that I will do everything I can to keep them safe, anyone trying to get to them is going to have to kill me first."

Having just got their family back together, Harry didn't want their to be the slightest doubt in anyone's mind that he'd deliberately endangered Hermione. Emma and Dan smiling at him showed they

understood that, only one more thing to do. "I'm really sorry about your wall, Augusta, I shouldn't have lost my temper."

The old witch was much more interested in what she'd seen here today. "Walls can be repaired, Harry. I know you four will look out for each other, that's the important thing here. Can I just say I'm so proud of you, all four of you." This was a sentiment shared by the extended family.

Bill had taught them to own up to their shortcomings and mistakes, it was time for the tutor to do the same. "Harry, guys, I'm sorry too. I saw tactics there that were reckless and downright callous, what I should have seen were calculated risks in an encounter that had set boundaries."

"This was my idea from the start, Professor Weasley, I thought it would be fun to get one over on the marauders. We knew exactly what we were doing from the moment you counted us off."

He should have figured Padma would be the one to instigate a stunt like this. Bill had one more question though. "...and just when did you lot learn to cast spells in goblin?" He'd known what language they were using, but not what they were casting.

The praise practically gushed from Padma as she answered that one. "Oh, that was Neville's brilliant idea. We don't know how to cast silently but using goblin has the same effect, neither Sirius or Remus knew what we were casting at them."

It was a disgruntled Sirius who had the last words on the matter. "Moony, we were stitched up!"

-oOoOo-

After their final visit to Neville's parents, their spirits were soaring again as Henrica led them back to Hogwarts. That all changed when they saw the spirit waiting on them at the main doors, the Lady Ravenclaw appeared worried. "Harry, you need to go to the infirmary at once..."

This time Harry was accompanied in his mad dash to the infirmary by Hermione running at his side, these two leaving the other three trailing. They burst into the infirmary to see the furthest away bed

with screens around it, Helena appearing through the floor beside them confirmed this was where they were meant to go. Pulling back the screen saw both of them gasp in shock

Luna was sitting up on the bed, her legs curled under her and Moonlight resting comfortably on her lap. Both were looking away from them but the pair also appeared to have been transfigured into stone.

A/N Thanks for reading.



## Chapter 43

Amelia was used to late night floocalls, it unfortunately went with the job, but the one from Arthur Weasley certainly surprised her. "What can have gone wrong with our goblin friends that would see you contacting me at this time of night?"

"We have a problem, Amelia, a really big problem. Did you know a first year student was attacked inside Hogwarts on Halloween? The witch was attacked in such a way that left her, and the cat she was holding, petrified."

"No I bloody didn't! What happened and how does it involve the goblins?" Amelia could clearly see the despair on Arthur's green features in her fireplace.

"Nobody knows what happened and the student was attending Hogwarts on a Potter scholarship, it was Luna Lovegood. Harry apparently hit the roof when he returned to the castle, mainly at the fact no one appeared to be doing anything about it. He sent an emergency call to his father and now the castle is crawling with goblins. Barchoke wants a meeting as soon as possible, in the Ministry or Gringotts. Luna is now in the goblin medical facility, they had no treatment for her at Hogwarts."

That last statement confused Amelia. "If Hogwarts couldn't treat her, why wasn't she sent to St Mungo's?"

"That's not quite true, Hogwarts would be able to cure her - but not until May or June."

"WHAT! That's seven or eight months away."

"Yes, I know. I think it was then that Harry hit the roof. Dumbledore appears to be trying to keep the whole incident quiet, his excuse was that this information getting out might lead to a panic."

Amelia wasn't buying that. "What he means is news of this getting out could cost him his job - I intend to see it does. I'll head for Gringotts and meet you there, I better alert the minister we might have a problem before I leave."

-oOoOo-

Amelia was led through some winding corridors to the medical facility, discovering that Arthur and Bill Weasley had arrived before her. She also soon discovered why Harry had blown his top, Luna Lovegood was as stiff as any statue with Hermione's cat petrified on her knee.

Barchoke didn't waste any time on preliminaries, but got right to the point. "Luna and Moonlight were discovered like this after the Halloween feast. They had been sitting in a windowed alcove, probably looking out at the world."

"Have you any idea what's wrong with them?"

The goblin conceded that Hogwarts had gotten the diagnosis correct, Barchoke made no attempt to hide his anger at the headmaster's inaction. "They've been petrified, Mandrake restorative draught will reverse the effects. Hogwarts have Mandrakes in their greenhouses - the second years are working with them - but they won't be mature enough for potion use until the summer. Dumbledore thought it was acceptable to leave Miss Lovegood in this state until then, I certainly didn't."

He then explained his involvement in this situation. "As her Father was planning a long expedition of several Nordic countries, he temporarily signed Luna's care over to me. I am responsible to the Grangers, Lovegoods and Creeveys for the safety of their children. Unlike Dumbledore, I take my responsibilities seriously. We currently have armed guards outside every dorm and patrols in the Hogwarts corridors. If we can't reach some kind of agreement here tonight, I shall be withdrawing my charges right after breakfast - and would advise you to get Susan out of there too."

Arthur could see the confusion Amelia was suffering and realised Barchoke had missed telling her a vital piece of information. "Amelia, what Ambassador Barchoke forgot to mention was the message written on the corridor wall - in blood. The chamber of secrets has been opened, enemies of the Heir beware!"

"We have checked Gringotts records to see who Slytherin's heir is, Tom Marvolo Riddle was his last direct descendant." Bill let that sink in before offering a translation. "The writing then means Voldemort's enemies beware."

Amelia didn't actually say 'oh shit!' But she certainly thought it. "What was Dumbledore's reaction? I can't imagine he would approve goblin guards inside Hogwarts."

The goblin's anger was tinged with disgust this time. "That old fool's answer was to have everyone go around in large groups, accompanied by prefects. The Lady Ravenclaw had to point out that prefects were students too, and shouldn't be endangered in this manner by a Hogwarts headmaster."

The implications of this tactic took the breath from Amelia. "That would just provide a bigger target for whatever is doing this."

"That was exactly the point I made, Hogwarts agreed with me. The goblin presence though can only be temporary, really only there as a stopgap measure."

Amelia understood at once what Barchoke was saying. When the news got out - and it would - that the goblins were guarding Hogwarts, the ministry would be slaughtered for not protecting the country's children. "If the ministry could impose on our goblin friends to protect the castle until lunchtime, I will have squads of aurors there to take over those duties."

Barchoke quickly agreed, leaving Amelia to ask if they had any idea what had caused the petrification. He had no answers at the moment, only theory's. "There is no spell known to the nation that can cause this, leaving us looking for other methods. Since both seem to have been petrified instantaneously, that would rule out administering a potion. Good luck with trying to pour a potion down a kneazle's throat, Moonlight certainly wouldn't be lying calmly on Luna's lap. The chamber of secrets refers to Salazar Slytherin, making us think of snakes. Our best guess at the moment is a medusa like creature."

Amelia could see the sense in that theory, she certainly didn't even want to think what could happen if a group of students walked into something like that.

Barchoke had more to offer. "We currently have alerts going out to all Gringotts branches, stating that we require mature mandrake for

the potion. We hope to have Miss Lovegood restored by the end of the week, she will prove to be our best chance at information."

The meeting was breaking up but Arthur had one last question for Barchoke. "Ambassador, I notice you didn't mention your son amongst those you would remove from Hogwarts?"

"My son is a centurion, one of three that are currently deployed to guard Hogwarts. He has patrols until midnight before resuming at six a.m. With his knowledge of the castle and status as Hogwarts champion, he will be invaluable to the force we have there. Please understand Mr Weasley, his status as a centurion makes him an adult in our society. My son will listen to his father's advice but make his own decisions."

-oOoOo-

Harry was currently handing over his duties, and the marauder's map to his fellow centurion, Splitnose. "The map shows the position of everyone in the castle, even us. If you need me, speak to one of the ghosts or portraits, they will soon get a message through."

Rather than being annoyed with the age of the centurion offering advice, Splitnose gratefully accepted the magnificent gift he'd just been offered. "This is a work of art, and offers a great strategic advantage to whoever holds it. Who made this?"

"The marauders were a group of students that included my dad, godfather and Remus Lupin. My father is working on the idea of getting the two remaining marauders involved with Master Flitwick to produce something similar for Gringotts. This will see right through invisibility cloaks, disguises and even polyjuice potion."

"That would indeed be a welcome addition to Gringotts security. Good night, centurion, I shall see you at six."

Harry entered the Ravenclaw common room to find three witches had waited up for him. Hermione and Padma he'd half expected, an upset Penny was a complete surprise.

The prefect immediately offered an apology. "I'm so sorry, Harry. We're all so used to seeing Luna with you guys that I never noticed she was missing."

"It's okay, Penny, you are at least concerned for her. Dumbledore's lack of the same response was sickening, imagine thinking it would be acceptable to leave Luna like that until summer." Harry slumped down on the sofa in the space Hermione and Padma had left for him.

It had been a long day, and Harry had been on duty since they had returned to Hogwarts. Seeing him in his tunic as he patrolled the castle with a squad of goblin warriors would certainly reinforce the idea he was a centurion first, and a Hogwarts student second. Hermione gave him a moment before asking the question they were all dying to know the answer to.

"Did you find out any more?"

"The chamber of secrets was apparently built by Salazar Slytherin, and rumoured to contain something that would cleanse the school. I don't think we're talking about a new mop and bucket for Filch here."

Penny listened to this with horror. "Knowing the Slytherins, cleanse would mean getting rid of those whose blood was supposedly tainted. Isn't Luna a pureblood though?"

A nod from Harry told her she was right, there was also more to come. "That chamber was supposedly opened before, funnily enough when Tom Riddle was a student here. That time though a student died, we know her as Moaning Myrtle. She died in her toilet after hearing a boy's voice, she strode out to complain he shouldn't be there and a big pair of golden eyes is the last thing she remembers."

Padma was trying to work out the implications of that. "So Luna being a pureblood and still alive means we could be dealing with something completely different here?"

While her question was a valid one, Harry didn't think so. "Voldemort boasted he was descended from Slytherin. If that's true then any friend of mine would certainly be considered an enemy of his. We currently think Luna and Moonlight may have only caught a reflection of whatever it was that petrified them. Anything that can sneak up on a kneazle scares the shit out of me."

Hermione snuggled into his shoulder, comforting them both. "Can't Hogwarts tell you where this chamber is?"

"It's as if the knowledge has been hidden from the castle, this was done a thousand years ago. The marauder's map is tied into the Hogwarts wards, and the chamber doesn't show up on it either. With the feast in full swing and all the ghosts at Nick's death day party, that was a perfect time to strike." Harry then turned his attention specifically to Hermione. "We'll have to miss our training tomorrow, I'm back on patrol at six. I'll need to head up and write a report for my father, Master Pitslay will certainly bring the latest news with him tomorrow."

She didn't expect they would be training tomorrow but Hermione had one more question for him. "Will you be taking potions?"

"That depends on what news Master Pitslay brings. I'll be on duty until we're relieved - or have to withdraw. At that point you all need to get yourselves out the castle, I trust Dumbledore about as far as Colin could throw Hagrid."

-oOoOo-

Hermione felt a rush of pride run through her as she walked with Padma and their friends down to breakfast. Harry, no - Centurion Crow led Ravenclaw house down to the great hall. The Lady Helena was by his side and the squad of six goblin warriors under his command appeared ready for anything. Knowing his mate and friends were depending on him, Harry appeared to have left nothing to chance. There were warriors posted at every junction they past, warriors that would then join the train of students as they wound their way down to the great hall.

Harry had also told her that Centurion Splitnose had a command post close by where Luna and Moonlight had been discovered. With the Marauders' map and ten goblin warriors, Splitnose was monitoring everyone as they headed for breakfast - and ready to respond at the first sign of trouble.

She was seeing Harry in his natural environment, and so was the rest of Ravenclaw. He was at least as tall as the goblins under his command, and probably the broadest across the shoulders. His youth suddenly didn't seem so important, and every goblin under his

command knew their centurion would hold his own in any battle they were forced to fight.

They made the great hall without incident and, while apprehension was certainly in the air, every student felt safer knowing the goblins were around.

Albus didn't seem to think so, and complained loudly to his deputy. "This was why I wanted the incident kept quiet, frightened children do not make good students."

Minerva came right back at him. "Neither do petrified ones, Headmaster. I much prefer seeing the students safe than stiff, their safety is our responsibility after all."

"The castle is perfectly safe, Miss Lovegood would have been fine if she'd attended the feast like she was supposed to."

This time it was Filius who rounded on Albus. "An eleven year old girl was probably missing home, and certainly her friends. Your theory that students are safe because you say so has more holes in it than a sieve. Were you aware that Mr Creevey had sneaked out of Gryffindor to visit his friend in the infirmary? What about the three separate couples that were found frequenting various broom closets throughout the castle? That was why Harry had to put guards at each house entrance, as much to keep the students in as to stop anything gaining entry."

"As I said, if they did what they were told, all of this could be avoided."

Henrica couldn't think of anyone she'd ever known who had the ability to infuriate her the way Dumbledore could. "That is because they are like you, headmaster. They are sure they know better than those doing the telling, and have no concept of their own mortality. Thankfully, they will grow out of it and gain some maturity. You though are a hopeless case."

Filius couldn't contain his chuckle as their youngest professor so successfully lampooned Hogwarts oldest.

Harry approached Hermione with a proposal. "I really need to eat with the warriors, my mate though would certainly be welcome to join me."

Padma made Hermione's mind up for her. "Go, I want to see how Parvati is - and have breakfast with Neville."

Hermione was soon back on Harry's arm, heading over to the table Hogwarts had provided for her goblin guards. That hardly rated a mention at the Ravenclaw table, they were too busy trying to work out when Padma had learned to speak goblin. On the arm of her centurion mate, Hermione was treated with the utmost respect by the goblin warriors. Her esteem rose even higher when Master Pitslay arrived and spoke with both of them.

The guards left before the students, taking up positions at predetermined strategic points though out the castle, leaving the professors to collect their students and lead them to their classroom.

-oOoOo-

All the auror classrooms were empty, Amelia had rounded them up for some on the job training. The trainees' eyes and ears would be just as useful as the older aurors they would be assigned to work alongside. It was more about flooding Hogwarts with uniforms, and having the numbers available to deal with any threat. Her plan was a simple one, keep the children safe until Christmas and then empty the castle. Barchoke had promised goblin aid in pulling Hogwarts apart to find this famous chamber, Amelia hoped she would be busy this Christmas again. Her reason for that was simple, it would mean all the children were safely at home - and not petrified or in the morgue.

She led fifty aurors into the great hall at lunchtime, with a Goblin Ambassador on one side and the Minister of Magic on the other. The trio in front approached the staff table as Dumbledore stood to greet them.

"Cornelius, is this really necessary?"

Amelia cut right across him. "Headmaster Dumbledore, did you knowingly fail in your duty to inform a parent or guardian that their child was injured?"



"No."

This rocked Amelia back for a second. "You didn't inform Miss Lovegood's parent or guardian that she had been attacked..."

"Technically, Miss Lovegood hadn't been harmed. She would have made a complete recovery when we administered the mandrake potion."

Barchoke then proved that a goblin's sense of humour was an acquired taste. "Technically, Headmaster, should I plunge my knife through your ribcage, you would suffer a heart attack and die. The point being though, whatever term you call it, you would still be dead."

This saw Harry and the rest of the goblins roaring with laughter, while Hermione just looked skyward for some Devine intervention - nothing else had helped her with goblin humour.

The minister then proved he wasn't here because he enjoyed visiting the Scottish highlands in November. "I think the point is that you clearly failed in your duty of care to this young girl. While your actions before the attack could be excused, your total lack of action afterwards borders on being considered criminal. It is well within my powers to suspend you until the school board can meet, I have every intention of doing so."

This saw Albus sit back down as the minister turned his attention to Minerva. "Professor McGonagall, can you assume control of Hogwarts? The ministry will assume responsibility for the castle's security, and I can't thank our goblin friends enough for their aid in protecting the students until we could respond."

This comment saw some of those same students begin to applaud their goblin protectors, a move that soon spread to all four house tables.

Amelia asked Harry if he could work with her until dinner time, Professor Sprout instantly giving her consent for him to skip his herbology class. This would allow the handover to go much more smoothly, and give Barchoke more time to spend with his son. He

had a meeting tonight that was unavoidable, though he certainly hoped another meltdown would be.

-oOoOo-

The goblin ambassador used his diplomacy by including Sirius in his visit to Crawley, Barchoke needed all the help he could get. This became apparent the instant Dan answered the door to them.

"What's happened? We just saw them yesterday!" Dan's loud outburst saw Emma come running as Barchoke offered both his reassurance.

"Dan, Emma, I saw them just before they sat down to eat dinner together. They are all fine but we think the danger Dobby attempted to warn Harry about has made an appearance."

Dan so wanted to shout about why Hermione was still in the castle but had learned his lesson from the last time he did that. Knowing that these two would face down the Devil to protect their family saw him hold his tongue for now. He would listen to what was happening and then make sure his point of view would be included too, before they all jointly decided on the next move.

The four went through to the lounge and had a seat before Barchoke attempted to explain what was going on. "Something attacked Luna and Moonlight at Halloween, leaving both of them petrified. There is a potion that will have them as good as new in the space of a few hours and Gringotts are currently scouring their branches around the world to obtain the main ingredient. On hearing that Dumbledore intended to do nothing about the situation, Harry sent an emergency message to me. Nothing inside Hogwarts moved last night without the squads of goblin warriors I had posted there knowing all about it."

Dan felt his heartbeat returning to something approaching normal since the first instant he laid eyes on their two visitors, Emma's hand slipping into his confirmed she was feeling the same way. Barchoke had even more good news for the concerned parents.

"Last night I met with Amelia and explained what needed to happen, otherwise I would be withdrawing the students I was responsible for. She arrived in Hogwarts with about fifty aurors at lunchtime. She

also brought along the Minister of Magic, who seemed to take great delight in suspending Albus Dumbledore. McGonagall is in charge of the school while a large auror presence will deal with the castle's security. The plan is to prevent any more incidents and then rip the castle apart to find whatever is doing this over the December holidays."

Emma had picked up on an omission, and was sure she knew why it had been omitted. "You didn't mention Harry, am I to assume he will be staying in the castle?"

Sirius wasn't happy about this part and let his displeasure be known. "Harry was actually leading patrols around the castle last night and, like the goblins, will be heavily involved in any search of Hogwarts over Christmas."

Barchoke understood that point of view, even somewhat sympathised with it, but he knew Harry better than anyone - though Hermione was catching up fast.

"Harry is a centurion and, as I have said many times, his position was earned. Last night he led warriors for the first time and I have heard nothing but good reports back, my son performed his duties admirably. You all suffer from seeing him as a twelve year old boy, my son is like no boy you will ever have met. For years he's trained his body and mind to be weapons, this is who Harry is - you have to trust he knows what he's doing."

Emma sensed Barchoke's last comment was aimed as much at himself as it was them, she cut the goblin some slack. "Well I think we all know Hermione's not going to be pleased if she's to spend Christmas apart from Harry. Just to be clear here, there is no way I want our daughter anywhere near Hogwarts when they're actively searching for whatever did this."

This got a definite nod of agreement from her husband before Dan then added his own tuppence worth. "While not exactly happy with the situation at the moment, I understand the lengths you have gone to for their safety. I also want it understood that if whatever this is attacks again, then Hermione is out of there."

This drew a sigh of relief from Barchoke, relief at how well both parents were accepting this. "Amelia has already passed orders that,

should there be another attack, the castle will be evacuated and Hogwarts closed until the problem is solved. She is no happier with this situation than any of us, Susan is in that castle too. Those plans may change if Luna can give us more information after we get our hands on some mature mandrake. If the situation proves more dangerous than we thought, she'll close the school at once."

While the idea of getting Hermione out of there earlier initially appealed to Dan and Emma, the thought that their daughter might be in real danger was not a pleasant one.

-oOoOo-

Their daughter had just finished her dinner and was telling her mate what they should do next. "Harry, we need to head to the library." This generated a blank look until she explained. "Somewhere in there might be information that will help us identify what's doing this, I want to help stop it - and get a bit of revenge for Luna and Moonlight."

Roger hated bursting her bubble of enthusiasm, but he attempted to convey the scale of the problem they would be tackling. "Hermione, while I agree the library could have that information, it would be like looking for a needle in a haystack."

"Well, we know it wasn't a spell or a potion that caused them to be petrified. That leaves the most logical explanation as a magical creature. Add in Salazar Slytherin's involvement and a snake like creature would seem the most obvious choice. We now have a snake like creature whose gaze from its golden eyes kills, though seeing a reflection appears to petrify it's victims. I would say that information makes our search more like looking for a pretty large needle in a rather small haystack, wouldn't you?"

Roger, like the rest of Ravenclaw that was within hearing distance, couldn't answer, he just stared at Hermione with his jaw slack. She hadn't spouted any information that was new, Hermione had just neatly assembled the known knowledge to form a theory that was hard to refute.

It was a proud Harry who offered Hermione his arm as the two of them set off for the library. Leaving Roger shaking his head and muttering to himself. "Those two are something else."

Padma had been sitting quietly, preoccupied with staring at her twin. Parvati appeared as if she hadn't slept for a week and was as skittish as a kitten. Padma then shifted her gaze to Blaise, silently promising to use some of the nastier curses she had learned on the wizard if he'd caused this with Parvati. The Slytherin didn't look in either Patil's direction, leaving Padma even more confused. Hearing Roger mutter, she gave him an answer he wasn't expecting.

"Roger, you don't know the half of it." She left to join her friends in the library, knowing Neville wouldn't be letting Colin out of his sight. She wasn't doing any good sitting here and a research project might be exactly what she needed to take her mind off her troubles.

-oOoOo-

Lucius didn't have his troubles to seek, an absolutely furious Narcissa was all the trouble he could handle. His wife had just thrown today's Prophet at him, ruining any appetite for breakfast. There was no comfort to be had in seeing he'd achieved one of his goals, Dumbledore was finished at Hogwarts.

"Tell me you didn't have a hand in this?" Lucius had no answer for his wife.

"Our son is in that castle, tell me he's in no danger?" Again he didn't know how to answer Narcissa.

"Stop this, I demand you put a stop to whatever this is at once."

This time he did have an answer for his wife, unfortunately it was one Lucius knew she wasn't going to like. "I can't, it's out of my control now. Believe me I've tried, but it can't be done."

It was now Narcissa that had nothing more to say, she just headed out the room. "Where are you going? We can't say or do anything, I could end up in Azkaban, and the Malfoys would be left without a Knut."

The furious witch spun around to face her husband. "Do you think I give a shit about any of that when Draco's life could be at stake? Understand this, Lucius, I gave birth to that boy and will protect him

with my life. Even if it means crossing you, I won't hesitate. Do you want to try and stop me heading to Hogwarts?"

The fury displayed in her eyes, and the wand now in her hand, convinced Lucius that this was a situation where discretion was the better part of valour. He just shook his head, which was probably the smartest answer he'd given all morning.

-oOoOo-

Minerva stood after breakfast to talk with the students, her first time as Acting Headmistress. "While we certainly find ourselves in unusual circumstances, I think it's important that, while observing the new safety measures, Hogwarts continues to run as normally as possible. With this in mind, I decided that the first year defence club will take place as usual tonight..." Minerva was forced to pause as all the first years had broken into cheering at that news. She let it die down before continuing. "While Professor Lockhart made a very generous offer to take tonight's club, thus guaranteeing everyone's safety, I decided that an auror escort and Professor Flitwick assisting Professor Hobson should be more than enough security for tonight's club."

Gilderoy sat there almost preening himself as he heard his name mentioned, totally missing the sarcasm McGonagall had aimed in his direction. The students didn't thought and sniggering could be heard throughout the hall. Everyone in Hogwarts, except a still grinning Gilderoy, knew Crow's Marauders would be far safer in the company of the four second years who ran the club than in Liar Lockhart's care.

"A pair of aurors will collect the first years from each house and lead them up to the seventh floor, there will be no wandering away - are we clear on that Mr Creevey?"

Colin may have had his head down but everyone heard him say 'yes professor'.

Minerva returned her steely gaze to include the entire hall. "This is not a game, it's beginning to appear that only good fortune saw Miss Lovegood survive relatively unscathed. These aurors are here inside Hogwarts by order of the Minister of Magic himself. They're putting their very lives at risk for our protection, anyone disobeying their

orders will find themselves heading home as quickly as I can arrange it. Does everyone here understand that?" A chorus of 'yes professor' saw Minerva return to her seat.

Her posterior had hardly dented the cushion of Minerva's new chair when the pink haired auror led Narcissa Malfoy into the great hall. It didn't escape anyone's notice that another two aurors had taken up position behind the Malfoy matriarch, well Narcissa would certainly have missed it. Her eyes had immediately swept to the Slytherin table, her entire being focused on a frantic visual search for Draco. Seeing her son sitting there unscathed appeared to take some of the obvious tension out of the blonde witch, she continued walking toward the staff table.

"Mrs Malfoy, this is an unexpected pleasure. What can Hogwarts do for you?" Minerva was polite though knowing any Malfoy involvement would not bode well for the school.

Narcissa wanted to get both Draco and herself out of the castle as quickly as possible, there was no time to waste on social politeness. "My apologies for interrupting your breakfast, Professor, but today's Prophet ruined mine. Placing our children in danger may be acceptable to you but I have no intention of leaving my son inside a castle where attacks of this nature are taking place. I intend to take Draco home with me at once."

"That is your right, Mrs Malfoy, after you have signed the appropriate parchment. I resent your implication though that I am placing my students in danger. The ministry have taken responsibility for the castle's security, and I think they are doing an excellent job..." Minerva was already bristling with indignation, this certainly was not helped when Narcissa cut right across her.

"I'm afraid I have no faith in the ministry, and certainly have no intention of entrusting my son's safety to the likes of this!" Narcissa made certain everyone knew she was talking about the pink haired auror who had never left her side since she approached the castle.

Tonks though was not about to stand there and docilely accept these insults, she also knew just how to hit back. "Why Aunt, I didn't know you recognised me. Did you hear Sirius restored my mother to the Black family? He kicked both of her sisters out too, didn't like the

choices they had made. Don't worry though, Aunt Cissy, I'll still talk to you."

Narcissa was left fuming that family business was divulged in front of so many people, she turned her attention to her son. "Come, Draco, it's time to go home..."

"...but Mother, do I need to? What about my things?"

"Yes, Draco, you need to. Dobby will collect your things..."

That was like an explosion in Padma's head as her keen mind was busily connecting the dots Dobby being the Malfoy's house elf presented. Her gasp of astonishment died in her throat though, well before it could pass her lips. Padma was suddenly far more concerned with the strong hand that had just clamped down on her thigh. Looking to see that hand belonged to Harry rebooted her brain as Padma realised she was about to give vital information away.

She nodded her head slightly, indicating to Harry she was back in control. As Harry's hand was removed, Padma drew some comfort from seeing Harry's other hand had also clamped around Hermione's thigh.

Draco was also beginning to decipher what his mother was not actually saying, he didn't like it one bit. "...what about Pansy, can she come too?"

Narcissa felt she was giving more information away here than she'd intended, there was nothing else for it though. "Draco, only her parents can sign the necessary parchment. Now let's go complete this process and head home."

The message that Draco's body language conveyed to Pansy was read by all of Slytherin, and a good portion of the rest of the school. Her slight nod meant that no one would be surprised when the Parkinsons arrived to collect their daughter, when would depend on how soon Pansy could get to the owlery.

As McGonagall led the Malfoys to her new office, the rest of the students were getting ready for their first period class. As the Ravenclaw trio were preparing to follow their head of house to charms, they were joined by Neville. "Harry, making a move on



Padma too? Parvati certainly spotted what was going on so you'll be the talk of the school by lunchtime."

"Sorry about that, I needed some way of distracting these two from blurting out things we don't want anyone else to know. It certainly worked and if people are talking about that, it will take their minds of other things."

"Oh, so now I'm just a distraction, Crow? I feel so used. Neville, I think you should challenge this scoundrel to a duel, my honour is at stake here."

"Eh, Padma, he beats both of us together - along with Hermione - every week. I think I'll give that a miss." All three of her friends appreciated Padma's attempts at humour, and her determination to stay positive, as her relationship with her twin crashed and burned.

Neville had some news that might raise a chuckle. "Well, Malfoy leaving destroyed Ron's theory that Draco was the Heir of Slytherin - and the one causing the attacks."

This left Hermione shaking her head. "I think hearing he actually had a theory is more shocking than what that theory was."

This raised a laugh amongst the group but Neville had more for them. "Oh, he had a lot more than a theory, Ron had an entire plan worked out to prove he was right." Noticing he had his friends attention now, Neville told them the rest. "He had somehow heard rumours that Harry possessed an invisibility cloak, I was supposed to ask if Ron could borrow it. He was sure getting into the Slytherin common room would see Malfoy revealing all - proving his theory."

Hermione poured scorn all over that idea. "...and did he think an invisibility cloak was going to protect him from whatever was attacking the students?"

"Actually, he did. Ron argued that, if this thing couldn't see you then its eyes couldn't possibly effect you." Neville presented the argument evenly, he himself not knowing the truth of the matter.

This left Hermione floundering. "That's...that's...that's either the most idiotic thing I've ever heard - or sheer genius." She looked toward Harry for help in making her mind up.

He could only shrug his shoulders. "I'll pass it along to my father with the rest of the news, we always hang behind in defence class anyway."

"You have news?"

The hope in Susan's voice hurt that they couldn't really tell her more. "Sorry Susan, it's just anything we hear get's passed on to my father. I'm certain anything important will soon make it's way to your aunt."

She was nodding at that. "It's just hard, feeling so helpless."

Padma had a suggestion for Susan and Hannah. "We've got the marauders tonight, but tomorrow we're back to researching in the library. We're trying to discover what could be causing this, you're both welcome to join us."

The two girls quickly accepted that invitation before Hannah asked another question. "Is there any more news on Luna?"

They all could see the barely contained fury that Harry displayed at the mention of the young girl's name. "We'll find out the latest in defence. Last I heard, my father was still hopeful that Luna would join us by the weekend."

Hermione slipped her arm around Harry to offer some comfort, knowing how much the attack on Luna had affected him. She herself was now facing a miserable Christmas without him. She wouldn't complain though, this is who Harry was. With Padma already in the doldrums, and both Smita and Ramrao determined to get their twin daughters together to discover just what was wrong, this could be a miserable Christmas all round.

-oOoOo-

Albus Dumbledore stood outside the village of Hogsmead and gazed up at the majesty that was Hogwarts castle. It was exactly a hundred years ago this September that an eleven year old Albus first set foot in its hallowed halls, an anniversary that was marked by the release of that book of Skeeter's that started all his troubles. That wasn't strictly true though, his troubles had really started the year before, with Harry's arrival at the castle.

Now that Albus had left Hogwarts, he found himself able to look back at his final year and identify the glaring mistakes he'd made. The biggest was underestimating the caliber of the opponents he faced, a mistake he never really recovered from. Albus knew without a doubt that the Hogwarts board would dismiss him as headmaster as soon as they convened, he had no intention of hanging about to give them that pleasure.

His reputation might be in tatters, and his decision making had lately been questionable at best. He was still Albus Dumbledore though, one of the most powerful and knowledgeable wizards in the world. It was time to make a new future for himself. Albus understood better than anyone that his destiny was irrevocably intertwined with that of Hogwarts and her chosen champion, Harry Crow ne Potter. That would of course have to be factored into any future plans, plans that would hopefully see him make a triumphant return to Britain and Hogwarts.

With one last longing look at the castle, Albus proclaimed "I'll be back!" before he disappeared away to whatever the future held for him.

A/N thanks for reading

A/N 2 while looking ahead, I've hit a bit of a conundrum - how do you physically alter something that isn't physically there? Specifically, how did the basilisk affect Sir Nicolas and how the hell do you administer the mandrake potion to a ghost? Any good ideas might find their way into the story - credited of course.

## Chapter 44

Like students the world over, those of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry quickly adapted to the new situation they found themselves in. While they may wish to spend time in a broom closet with their boyfriend / girlfriend, none of the students thought it was worth risking death for.

McGonagall had also pulled a master stroke by inviting the press into Hogwarts. This was a success on two fronts, it reassured the parents their children were safe and showed Hogwarts had nothing to hide. Madam Bones explaining their plan to tear the castle apart at the Christmas holidays also settled nerves, those holidays were only six weeks away.

Whether it was the pictures of aurors accompanying students around the castle or the mere fact that the ministry actually had a plan, the expected flood of students leaving Hogwarts never progressed much past a trickle. Pansy Parkinson was one of the few whose parents arrived in Hogwarts and demanded she return home with them.

The study group was making steady progress in the library, that meant they were working their way through a mountain of books with no positive results so far. The four were looking forward to their Saturday morning classes. Hermione had an experiment she wanted to try, in the hope she could disprove Ron Weasley's invisibility equaled invulnerability theory.

-oOoOo-

Neville found himself being the unfortunate, and certainly uncomfortable guinea pig since Hermione hadn't been able to let go of this conundrum since he mentioned the redhead's theory earlier in the week. Bill was genuinely interested in the experiment too, as even he was unsure what the result might be.

Hermione asked the room for a hoop on the floor, and then had Neville stand inside it while donning Harry's invisibility cloak. As the lights in the room dimmed, Hermione began her explanation.

"An invisibility cloak works by bending light around its wearer, making them undetectable to the human eye." She then cast a

lumos to prove her point, and it did. There was no sign of Neville, not even a shadow. "Now, while the cloak can bend light around its wearer, the question is whether it can bend magic?"

Hermione then cast red sparks at the space the hoop told her Neville was, they seemed to bounce off thin air. The witch let out a whoop of triumph before casting a stinging hex at the same space. An 'ouch' and Neville removing the cloak's hood left his irked head floating in mid-air.

"Was that stinger really necessary, Hermione?"

"Oh don't be such a baby, you could hardly have felt that through your duelling robes. We needed to see if magic could penetrate the cloak. Now, whatever petrified Luna and Moonlight was certainly magical, agreed?" She got nods all around for that conclusion as Hermione then rounded off her reasoning. "We have just witnessed that an invisibility cloak is no defence against magic, therefore no defence against whatever is attacking and petrifying. Ron could have been petrified or dead and no one would have known, not until someone literally tripped over him."

"What?"

"Oh, sorry Professor Weasley, it was just a theory Ron had." Hermione decided to quickly change the subject. "Now, after I successfully used Rowena Ravenclaw's goblin translation spell on Neville and Padma, Barchoke approached Director Ragnok about the other people I wanted to use it on. The director agreed, providing we can keep the spell a secret. So, would you like the ability to speak goblin?"

Bill almost exclaimed 'what!' again, while realising he was being sidetracked here. The ability to communicate in goblin though would be a tremendous boon to his career, and he could always wring the truth out of Ron at lunchtime. "Hermione, that would be brilliant."

She cast the spell and then they got down to work, with Bill now shouting at them in goblin.

-oOoOo-

Barchoke missed the days when he could shout at people. He was now having to talk nice to get what he wanted, it was probably going to cost him gold as well. It would certainly be worth it to get his enemy's head mounted on his wall. He would never send someone into danger unprepared though, she deserved to know exactly what this task entailed.

"Miss Skeeter, you are well aware of our target's reputation, and know how dangerous this mission could be. I can provide you with an emergency portkey that will punch its way through the heaviest wards and deposited you here. As the name implies, it would be for use only in an emergency. Your target would certainly know if it was used."

Rita certainly understood the danger, and that portkey would be a godsend if she was discovered, but it was now time to talk business. "As you rightly said, I would be putting myself in great danger. This leads us to the question, what's in it for me?"

With only her ambition matching Rita's greed, Barchoke was sure they could come to some arrangement. When it came to his family's safety, money was no object as far as Barchoke was concerned. Lucius Malfoy had certainly endangered his family, and the goblin was willing to part with gold to ensure the bastard paid for it.

"We have quite a few options available, depending on which you preferred. You could work for a fee, with a generous bonus if we achieve our ultimate aims. Any story you wish to write after that would of course be yours to sell, providing you kept any goblin involvement out of it. You may also wish to write another book - we would certainly offer very favourable terms for publishing it."

Testing the waters, Rita posed a question. "What sort of fee would we be talking about for this?"

Barchoke laid it out for the ex-reporter. "If you can provide me with the information that sees Lucius Malfoy shipped off to Azkaban, my delight and gratitude would be in the region of ten thousand galleons."

The number mentioned almost had Rita swooning but she asked for clarification. "Lucius Malfoy is as slippery as they come. What

happens if I get the information yet he manages to talk his way out of it - will I still get paid?"

"You get the information and the rest will be up to me. Malfoy has previously used his position and money to avoid justice, he now has neither of those options available to him. As an Ambassador, I have a direct line into the ministry. I also have the ear of Madam Bones, and the gratitude of the minister for assisting with guarding Hogwarts. We just need enough proof to get Malfoy arrested and fed truth serum, the rest will be easy."

Rita was never going to say no to a deal like that, though left her final financial options open for the moment. There was always the prospect of a better deal if she got the goods on good old Lucius.

-oOoOo-

The Ravenclaw table were not alone in wondering what the deal was with the quartet of second years who arrived for lunch, still dressed in dragon skin. Hermione provide what was a quiet simple answer.

"Professor Weasley wants us to wear them all the time until this problem is solved. He didn't see the point of our duelling robes lying in our rooms when there was something dangerous sulking around the castle. We didn't really have an answer to refute that, so the robes stay."

It was Harry who saw her first, the little blonde nervously holding onto Sirius' arm as they entered the great hall together. His wide smile of welcome saw a tearful Luna start to run toward him. Harry shot up, soon having her wrapped in his arms and Luna's feet swinging off the floor as he spun her around. The delight in both their faces was clearly displayed for all to see. That was before everyone else crowded around, desperate to check that Luna was indeed all right.

Hermione had Luna wrapped in a hug by the time Sirius squeezed his way through the crowd with another returnee, this one in a wicker carrying case. "There's someone else here that wants to say hello."

"Moonlight!" Hermione had been managing to hold back the tears as she greeted Luna, but there was something about her pet being returned that saw her resolve break. The kneazle purred in satisfaction at being once more in his witch's arms.

Sirius had a warning for all those crowding around the little blonde. "Luna's already had a meeting with the head of the D.M.L.E. and answered all Madam Bones' question, she doesn't need to be interrogated again. Lay off the questions people."

Harry led Luna to the Ravenclaw table before turning to her friends who had followed her there. "Colin, Ginny, don't let Luna out of your sight until we get back."

Hermione then approached, with her familiar cradled in her arms. "Luna, could you take care of Moonlight for me?"

The little blonde's eyes seemed to get even wider at that request. "Are you sure, Hermione?"

Her smile said it all. "Yes, I'm sure, Luna."

The four left with Sirius and Henrica, but not before noticing their friends had gathered around Luna to make sure Sirius' instructions would be obeyed. No one was going to hassle her today.

Sirius meanwhile gave the group the bad news, Luna remembered even less than Myrtle. The golden eyes she did remember though confirmed their suspicion, both she and Moonlight were lucky to survive.

-oOoOo-

It was really the next morning while exercising before Hermione had a chance to talk with Harry alone. "It wasn't your fault, Harry. Luna was just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

He didn't answer for a moment but when he did, Harry's reasoning surprised his mate. "This is a massive castle, Hermione, and Luna was stationary. What are the chances of this creature just happening to pick that particular window Luna was sitting in? There must be over a hundred little windowed alcoves like that spread around Hogwarts, I remember spending a lovely afternoon with you sitting in



one about this time last year. Odds like that make me think this was no coincidence, but a deliberate attack on someone close to me."

It was now Hermione's turn for quiet contemplation as they ran around the track Hogwarts had provided them within her oh so special room. "I never thought of looking at it from that angle, you make a pretty compelling case. What do we do now?"

"Keep everyone close and safe for the next thirty six days, and then I can go hunting. The instant the Hogwarts school board officially kick Dumbledore out, father will approach McGonagall about rebuilding the wards around Hogwarts during the holiday's too. That will also give us more warriors on site, just in case we need them."

The search teams needing to call for reinforcements was not something Hermione even wanted to think about, knowing full well Harry would be right in the thick of it. "We need to research more, so you will have at least some idea what you will be up against."

"Hermione, at the rate we're going, we'll have covered every book on creatures the library has within the next two weeks. It's better to keep the research at the pace we've set, rather than speed it up and maybe miss something."

Again, Hermione couldn't fault his logic so changed the subject slightly. "You really like Luna, don't you?"

For any other young man, that question being asked by their girlfriend would result in an instant answer of 'hell no!' Their blood bond meant Harry could answer with total honesty, safe in the knowledge that Hermione knew exactly how he felt about her being his mate. This was certainly a good thing, the smile her question generated would have earned at least a slap from any 'normal' girlfriend.

"Luna is just ...so Luna. She looks at me and sees Harry, not Centurion Crow, Lord Potter or any boy-who-lived rubbish - she just sees me. You of all people must know how refreshingly different that is for me. Padma and Neville are the same, but they took a little while to get there."

Harry's smile waned as he continued. "At the ministry ball, Emma said I'd had a hard life - I disagreed. Looking at Luna, I have no right

to complain. Her mother died in a magical accident at home, Luna was eight and alone in the house with her mother when it happened. Her dad apparently didn't take his wife's death too well, father called him 'eccentric' - which has me wondering what would have happened to Luna if we hadn't stepped in with the scholarship, and our friendship."

They ran for another lap before Harry spoke again. "I know we haven't mentioned the holidays, neither of us wants to think about being apart again. We both know I need to be here though, just as we both know your mum and dad won't want you anywhere near Hogwarts while the search is underway. What I wanted to ask was if you could include Luna in any plans for the holidays? Padma's going to have to go home to get the problem with Parvati sorted, at least this way you won't be on your own."

Hermione stopped running, making Harry wonder if he'd said something wrong. Those fears were soon proved groundless as Hermione pulled him in for a sweet kiss. "That's my Harry, always thinking of others. Why do I feel like our little family just acquired a new sister?"

He actually blushed at how well Hermione could read him, that wasn't supposed to be possible. "Well, she's a nice kid and..." another kiss removed the need for words.

After leaving him bewitched and bewildered, Hermione shot away. "Two more laps to go, last one finishing is a rotten egg!"

Tonks stood at the door, totally forgotten by the young couple. Sirius had asked if a guard could be provided to escort them to and from their morning exercise. After he'd made her mum's dream of once more being a member of the Black family become a reality, Tonks had no intention of passing this duty onto anyone else.

She had overheard Harry's reasoning on the attack and, like Hermione, couldn't fault his conclusions. Tonks didn't think she would be breaking any confidences if she passed that information onto Madam Bones, these two appeared more clued up about what was happening in the castle than most of the adults.

-oOoOo-

It was a rather irked Roger who sat down to lunch that Sunday, leading to some gentle jibes from around the Ravenclaw table.

"Did you get beaten again by our big, bad second years?"

"I thought you said it was their turn to taste defeat today - what happened?"

The sniggers building up around the table saw Roger's complexion becoming redder and redder. Finally, he could hold it no longer. "I would like to see any one else at this table stand up to people casting spells at them in goblin. It was bloody terrifying, not knowing what was coming at you."

This may have stopped the sniggers, as wizards and witches contemplated just how scary that would be. There was no sympathy heading in the fourth year's direction though, Cho summed up what most of them were thinking.

"Suck it up, Davies, at least you're getting extra tuition. The Weasley twins don't seem too upset about it?"

"That's because they thought it was a brilliant prank. When they heard it was Neville's idea, only the fact they were knackered stopped them carrying him on their shoulders to Gryffindor Tower."

The second years in question entered the great hall, with their trio of first year shadows beside them. They all headed for the Ravenclaw table to eat lunch.

Morag was the first to attempt teasing information out this group. "So, Padma, we're hearing you're quite the linguist?"

Padma answered in Hindi, Goblin and then English. "Like Harry, English is not my native tongue. That certainly makes it easier to pick up another language."

That seemed a bit too glib for Lisa. "...and what's Neville's excuse?"

This didn't even warrant a blink from Padma as she answered right back. "Oh, Neville is just a natural. Either that, or he likes my reward method of teaching."

This may have had Neville blushing but Padma easily achieved her goal, no one was too interested in how they could speak goblin after that. The state of her relationship with Neville was a far juicier titbit for them to sink their teeth into.

Hermione took this opportunity to have a quiet word with Luna. "What are you doing for the Christmas Holidays?"

"Oh, daddy's trip is paying dividends, I was going to stay in the castle. I'll have to write to him and say he needs to come home now, the castle's going to be closed."

Hermione felt her heart go out to this girl a little more, Harry was right again. "Do you want to write and ask if you could spend Christmas with me? With Harry going to be inside Hogwarts, and Padma having to go home, you would be doing me a big favour. I've gotten used to having my friends around me, I would love to spend Christmas with at least one of them."

"Do you really mean that?"

Seeing the hope in those pleading eyes left Hermione wanting to cry. Instead, she smiled at Luna and answered honestly. "Every word of it, Luna."

Her wide smile would melt hearts a lot harder than Hermione's, the brunette was surprised though when Eargit swooped into the hall. The snowy owl landed in front of the two witches and held her leg out, there may have been nothing tied there but Eargit's message was clearly understood.

"Write your letter, Luna, Eargit's just offered to carry it for you."

The owl returned its foot to the table and nodded its head in agreement.

This drew a cry of exasperation from Roger. "Aw for Merlin's sake, even the bloody owl's not normal. How many languages does it speak?"

Harry interrupted before anyone else could answer. "Eargit is a classy owl, she's above using things like language." That the owl

chose that exact moment to emit a little bark was either one hell of a coincidence or bloody scary.

"See, Eargit doesn't need to speak to get her message across." Not one person who'd just witnessed that scene could disagree with Harry over that.

With Eargit now destined to be flying off to pastures unknown in search of Luna's father, Hermione would have a quick word with Sirius so he could speak with her mum and dad. She wasn't expecting any problems in clearing Luna coming home with her at Christmas.

-oOoOo-

With Luna's return, the atmosphere inside the castle was certainly on the up. They had the aurors for protection and the only victim of the attack was back as good as new. Crow's Marauders were certainly back having fun at their weekly class. They were working in their usual mixed teams of four to accurately hit the torso of their assigned duelling dummy ten times, preferably before the team they were competing against managed the feat. As the dummies were currently programmed to dodge spells, the competition was fierce - with the rest of the students shouting encouragement to those firing off spells.

Their round robin tournament produced the top four teams who then battled it out for the final, and tonight's eventual champions.

Henrica had spent most of the evening watching the accompanying auror guards as they stared in amazement at what these first years were learning. That was before they even considered that the class was being run by four second years. She spotted a chance here to build the current spirit inside Hogwarts even higher, and maybe get some payback for those ten galleons she lost betting on her boyfriend. As Hermione and Padma were presenting the winning team with their slabs of chocolate, Professor Hobson let her mischievous side out to play.

"Very well done everybody, and I know we normally spend this time reviewing what we've just learned - but I was wondering if we could do something a bit different tonight? Our auror guests appeared

fascinated with tonight's lesson, I was wondering if they wanted to put a team forward - against our instructors here?"

The roar of approval from the first years displayed their unanimous support for that idea, and the four instructors were clearly up for it. Tonks had again volunteered for this duty tonight, and found herself the most senior auror present. She asked four of the trainees if they wanted to accept the challenge, they too quickly agreed.

Harry set both dummies to require twenty hits before coming to a stop and Henrica counted them in. The quartet of auror trainees were soon left red faced as four second years wiped the floor with them, and the audience of first years went mental in celebration. The rules had been set at best of three so Tonks had some stern words with the auror team before the next round.

"They practice together all the time and use these dummies as part of their training. You lot thought you were facing off against some kids and got comprehensively beaten. This exercise was being attempted by first years, that should tell you it's not about how powerfully you can cast a spell. The whole point of this is to improve speed and accuracy - something I want to see from you now."

The marauder tutors were ready to go again, their concentration total. This time the result was so close, neither Tonks or Henrica could call it one way or the other. A tie was declared, again to much cheering from the jubilant first years.

The deciding leg saw four tense aurors trying to pull this out the fire. If anything, the teams were even closer this time, leading both judges ready to announce another tie before Harry reacted. He began shaking the auror's hands and thanking them for taking part, claiming they were delighted to sneak a draw against such stiff competition. The other three followed Harry's example and everyone left the class on a high.

Padma waited until they were back in the Ravenclaw common room, and just about to run through a final revision of their potion for tomorrow morning, before asking Harry why he did that. "We took the first bout fair and square, with the other two being drawn. That made us the winners!"

"Padma, those aurors are here to keep us safe, the last thing we need is to hit their moral. Can you imagine the ribbing they would take if the four of us claimed a victory? They can now rightfully say we surprised them in the first match, but they pulled it back over the next two. I think Henrica was trying to pay us back for taking down Sirius and Remus at Halloween. She expected us to lose and got as big a shock as those aurors, she hasn't seen us practice much this year."

Morag was left shaking her head. "I can't believe you took on four aurors, and held your own."

It was Hermione who tried to nip that kind of talk in the bud. "They were auror trainees, not qualified aurors. We were also running a speed and accuracy drill, something we have been practicing for over a year. That gave us a massive advantage, one we certainly used."

It was a thoughtful Morag who responded to that. "I so want to be jealous at your extra defence lessons, then I remember we get Professor Weasley twice a week. The rest of the castle are already jealous of us because of that."

Lisa had the final word on the matter. "Can you blame them, imagine being stuck with Lockhart as a defence teacher. The first years have at least got you every Tuesday night!"

-oOoOo-

It was Friday night as the study group worked their way through more books on beasts in the library. Colin, Ginny and Luna were getting caught up in the excitement of tomorrow's Quidditch match, the first they would see. That Ginny had two brothers playing in the game against Slytherin had her almost hyperventilating in anticipation, there would be no studying coming from that quarter tonight.

Susan and Hannah were also Quidditch fans, though tended only to get excited when Hufflepuff - or was it Cedric - was playing. The quartet would again miss the game, their training coming first. Padma was trying to convince them that they needed to attend the Gryffindor / Ravenclaw game, since so many of their friends would be involved in that match. Harry and Hermione were adopting a 'wait

and see' policy, while Neville wasn't too bothered either way - he would just go along with whatever the others decided.

Hermione audibly taking a deep breath was their first clue she was onto something, the colour draining from her face as those brown eyes scanned the page was certainly not a good sign.

"What have you found, Hermione? Does it fit what we're looking for?"

"I really, really hope not, Padma. Just reading about this is terrifying me, but it certainly matches the profile of the creature we're looking for." She turned the large book around so the others could get a better look at it.

Since the entire group still couldn't see the page, Padma began reading the description out loud. "Of the many fearsome beasts and monsters that roam our land, there is none more curious or more deadly than the Basilisk, known also as the King of Serpents. This snake, which may reach gigantic size and live many hundreds of years, is born from a chicken's egg, hatched beneath a toad. Its methods of killing are most wondrous, for aside from its deadly and venomous fangs, the Basilisk has a murderous stare, and all who are fixed with the beam of its eye shall suffer instant death. Spiders flee before the Basilisk, for it is their mortal enemy, and the Basilisk flees only from the crowing of the rooster, which is fatal to it."

Luna burst out laughing at that, drawing all eyes to her. "That last bit is an old wives tale. Rooster's crow when the sun comes up, it's daylight therefore the danger must be gone. My father is an expert on weird and wonderful creatures, our house is full of books on them. Basilisks are real scary monsters, and you don't want to face one with just a rooster in your hand."

Padma resisted the temptation to tease with that piece of information, there were about three cockerel verses sword or wand jokes that jumped into her head, this was a really serious situation. "Lives for hundreds of years certainly fits the profile, how is a giant snake getting about the school though?"

"Someone is leading it!" Just like Luna a moment ago, Harry now had every eye on him - waiting on an explanation. "This may be the



king of snakes but tell me, Luna, did any of those books in your home say a basilisk could read or write?"

Hermione was getting over the shock of her discovery and caught on to what Harry was implying at once. "The writing on the wall, it would need someone to do that."

"Wait, there's more here." Padma read out the small paragraph tucked under a drawing of the basilisk, this thing had so many fangs that great white sharks would turn green with envy. "Basilisk-breeding has been outlawed for over a millennium. This law has rarely been broken even by the darkest of wizards, since only a Parselmouth can control a basilisk."

"So there is a Parselmouth inside Hogwarts who's controlling a basilisk? Not good, this is so not good."

Harry tried to calm the girl down. "Easy, Susan, all we've got at the moment is a theory. It might seem a good theory but that's all it is for now. I'll pass a message onto my father with Assistant Ambassador Weasley first thing tomorrow, you might want to do the same with a letter to your aunt. We haven't one shred of proof at the moment. Let's pass on our research and they can have some experts look at it for flaws."

Neville tended to be the quiet one in the group, only speaking when he really had something to say. This meant though that when he did speak, they all listened. "I agree with Harry. We may think we're right but saying anything about this would probably start a panic. We can trust Amelia, Barchoke and McGonagall to make the right decisions, that doesn't mean we don't keep our eyes open."

Neville's calm demeanour helped them see this was the only thing they could do for now. Most of Hogwarts' students would be out of the castle tomorrow anyway, with the Quidditch match taking place. That would give those adults involved time to check their research and take whatever action they thought necessary.

No one felt like continuing their research after that, they left the library intent on seeing everyone to their houses. Hannah though proved just what you could learn from keeping your eyes open. "Guys, you need to see this."

They all looked to where Hannah had indicated, and saw a strange sight. A long line of spiders were crawling along the wall before disappearing through a crack in the ancient window fitting.

It reminded Hermione of people queuing to get on a bus, and that's when exactly what she was seeing here hit her. "Spiders flee before the Basilisk, for it is their mortal enemy. They're getting out of the castle!"

This was such strange behaviour for arachnids that it was hard to refute Hermione's claim. It was cold enough inside the castle in November, these spiders were risking death by leaving the protection of Hogwarts but not one hesitated. Some primeval need seemed to be controlling their behaviour.

"Susan, this is more proof we need to add to our messages home. We'll drop you two off at Hufflepuff and then head up to Gryffindor." When Harry used his Centurion command voice, not one of them thought to question him. Susan and Hannah were actually delighted at the escort to their house. Hermione, Padma and Neville also knew Harry wouldn't sleep tonight without seeing Colin safely inside Gryffindor tower.

Those spiders had just added physical proof to what was already a terrifying theory, a theory that was now playing on all their minds. As they approached Gryffindor tower, the group spotted a gaunt Parvati approaching from the other direction, this proved too much for an already stressed Padma - she raced toward her twin and soon had her tightly entrapped in her arms.

"Oh Pav, you shouldn't be walking around the castle by yourself - it's just too dangerous. We think we know what did that to Luna, we also know someone must be leading the basilisk..." Padma felt her twin stiffen in her arms and tried to offer some reassurance. "Don't worry Pav, we're sending word to Barchoke and Amelia, this will soon be over. Will you meet us for breakfast? We don't want to let anyone out of our sight. Whatever's wrong, we're still family."

Neville was by Padma's side and taking Parvati by the arm. "Don't worry, Padma, I'll look after her. The aurors are here now and the prefects will soon be doing the head count. You lot need to get back to Ravenclaw before that." The prefects were no longer performing patrols of the corridors, instead they were charged with ensuring

everyone was present in their own house, and informing the aurors each evening of their head count. Once the aurors had arrived, no student was allowed out until morning - hence Harry and Hermione needing a guard as they exercised.

Padma watched Neville lead her frightened twin into Gryffindor house with unshed tears gathering at the corner of her eyes, promising herself they would get this sorted soon. Hermione's voice pulled her back from her musings.

"Padma, we need to move. If we're even a minute late, Penny will push the panic button and have squads of aurors searching the castle for us." It was Luna though who took Padma by the arm and began leading her in the direction of Ravenclaw.

-oOoOo-

Harry was having trouble sleeping and called for the Lady Helena, deciding that she would be a good sounding board to bounce their theory off. She would soon tell him if their ideas were a mile out, there was a part of Harry that hoped they were.

Unfortunately, the Ravenclaw ghost just gave credence to their theory. Helena confirmed that Salazar was indeed a Parselmouth, and a basilisk was just the kind of creature he would leave behind in his chamber - knowing one day his heir would use it to 'cleanse' Hogwarts.

She promised to pass this news around to the other ghosts and portraits. Having an inkling of what they were dealing with meant they could at least begin to formulate some kind of contingency plan of how the castle would respond to another attack.

As Harry and Hermione were just about to finish their fencing practice the next morning, they got their first taste of those plans. Hogwarts' bell rang out a loud warning, a warning that reached every nook and cranny of the ancient castle.

Hermione was moving her sword scabbard from her back to her hip as they raced over to where they'd left their bottles of water and her duelling robe. As Harry helped her on with it, Tonks stood at the door with her arms spread wide - deliberately blocking the way.

"Neither of you are leaving this room until I get word that it's safe to do so." Tonks found herself staring straight into a sparking pair of green eyes, she was really having trouble believing that the owner of these eyes had yet to become a teenager.

"Auror Tonks, I outrank you and am ordering you to step aside - please. I don't want to hurt you, I would much rather you saw Hermione safely back to Ravenclaw tower than you force me to ask the castle to remove you."

"I promised Sirius I would look after you and we have no idea what's out there..."

"Unfortunately, we do..." Harry was interrupted by the Lady Helena passing through the door, and Tonks.

"Champion, you were right. We caught the attack in time and the evacuation of the castle has already begun. Myrtle actually saw who was controlling the beast but refuses to speak with anyone but you. I left her with the Baron while I came here."

Hermione was first to answer. "If the danger has past, I can come too!"

Tonks was right behind the young witch with her own answer. "You two aren't leaving my sight, let's go!"

Having an auror guard was certainly useful as Tonks' presence allowed them to follow wherever the Lady Helena led, while the rest of the students were being escorted toward the entrance hall. They turned a corner and came upon a scene of utter carnage. Stiff bodies of students and even a few aurors littered the corridor floor, the group must have walked right into the basilisk. They were being carefully removed by a squad of very nervous aurors, with the space above their heads occupied by a multitude of ghosts floating 'lifelessly' and aimlessly. They didn't want to meet anything that could do that to a ghost.

Hermione didn't recognise most of the ghosts, there were even a few ghostly horses mixed in there too. "What happened here?"

The lady had an answer for them. "Sir Nicolas was distraught that his deathday party allowed that attack to occur. When I heard from

our champion what might be responsible for these attacks, he contacted members of the headless hunt and offered them some sport. They received just enough warning to get here in time, and we managed to direct everyone else away from the danger."

It was time to ask the question Tonks wasn't sure she wanted to know the answer to. "Are they dead?"

"Yes, auror, that's why they're ghosts. Throwing themselves between the basilisk and its intended victim saw them adsorb enough of the basilisk magic to ensure these people are merely petrified - and not dead."

As they pushed through this macabre scene, Hermione noticed Sir Nicolas and the Friar. Like the other ghosts, both appeared to be filled with smoke - almost as if they had been burned. "How could the basilisk affect them?"

"They're already dead, Hermione, so can't die again. We all absorb a trickle of magic just from being in the castle, we need that trickle of magic to maintain our forms. That amount of concentrated magic all at once will overload their forms, making them lose what you would consider consciousness - until the foreign magic can slowly leak back out of them. Most should be fine by the time Christmas comes around, a matter of weeks is nothing to a ghost..." Helena trailed off, noticing Harry had knelt beside a pair of stiff bodies.

Harry was extremely relieved to see that Hannah and Susan were petrified, and not dead. He stood with his anger tightly controlled though silently promising that someone was going to pay for this.

The aurors who approached to move the two students also knew who this young witch was, and were certain the wrath of their boss would soon descend on Hogwarts. The Hufflepuff students had been making their way down to breakfast, excited about today's game, when the attack happened. Nine students and three aurors would have certainly died, if not for the swift actions of the ghosts.

The message on the wall, again written in blood, had halted both Hermione and Tonks in their tracks. Harry came up behind them, reading the macabre message too. "Her skeleton will lie in the Chamber forever." They needed more information before they could

hope to make any sense of that. "We need to talk with Myrtle right away, and find out what she knows."

On entering her bathroom, Harry would swear he saw relief on the ghostly face of the Slytherin House ghost. He didn't think the Baron was exactly comfortable dealing with the emotional spirit that was once a crying teenage witch.

Helena's voice was a lot more soothing. "Myrtle, Harry has raced through the castle to talk with you. He's here now, won't you come out?"

Harry kept his features composed when faced with the sight of a crying Myrtle slowly emerging from the toilet bowl, Hermione squeezing his arm was the only sign she felt as crept out as he was. Neither would look upon a visit to the loo in quite the same way ever again.

"Oh, Harry, it was horrible - simply horrible!" This declaration was followed by more sobbing from the distraught spirit.

"I understand it will be hard for you, Myrtle, but I really need to know what we're facing here." Harry offered the young ghost his most enigmatic smile, it seemed to be working.

"I don't know, Harry, I'm frightened. You may hate me once I tell you, and I don't think I could cope with that. You might not have noticed, but I don't exactly have a lot of friends." More crying followed that declaration.

Hiding his bemusement in favour of a smile, Harry gave the ghost the answer he hoped would get them some answers of their own. "Myrtle, I promise whatever you tell me here, I will still be your friend."

Myrtle was considering this when the door barged open and Henrica rushed in. "Harry, Hermione, the school is being evacuated. The portraits told us where you were, I need to get the four of you out of here."

As Neville and Padma filed in behind Henrica, a tortured shriek came from Myrtle. "It's her, she's the one!"

They all followed the direction Myrtle was indicating, her ghostly finger was pointing straight at a bemused Padma.

A/N Thanks for reading.

## Chapter 45

The stately elegance and sheer opulence of the room the young witch was inviting the wizard into was currently being totally ignored by the couple. This was more about the subject matter they were discussing claiming all of their attention, rather than any form of indifference or complacency.

"I was beginning to think you weren't going to be allowed to floo over. I really miss not seeing you every day."

"I'm really glad of a break from the Manor, things are pretty intense at home right now. Mother and father are both furious at each other, kinda makes me wish I was back at Hogwarts too."

Pansy was shaking her head at that idea as she led Draco to the sofa. "Not if it could get us killed. My mother and father are furious that this thing can attack purebloods, and the fact your father never warned anyone of what he was doing."

"The same rules still apply, Pansy. If my father gets caught, anyone who knew about whatever scheme he's up to will find at the very least their Gringotts vaults closed. Trust me, you wouldn't want to be in the same situation as us."

"So, you still don't know what he's done?"

Draco remained adamant in his opinion. "No, and I don't want to either. Even mother doesn't know what he'd been up to, just that we were in the same danger as everyone else. That's why she came to Hogwarts and dragged me out of there."

"I think my parents are frightened that, if your father gets caught, he might pull others down with him. I will of course truthfully claim I simply didn't want to be at Hogwarts without you. That's why I sent a letter home asking my parents to collect me."

It was then Draco dropped the bombshell. "My father had no intention of getting me out of there, mother had to draw her wand so he wouldn't stop her heading for Hogwarts. He's absolutely livid that she might have pointed the Ministry in his direction, while she is furious that he put me in such danger. It's quite a shock to discover



your father places some form of revenge over the value of his only child's life."

Pansy didn't know how to answer that, who would.

Draco took her silence as a sign to continue, he was speaking his recent thoughts out loud for the first time - showing just how concerned Draco was at the current situation. "I am starting to question everything my father has taught me. He claims Malfoys bow to no one, yet he then sullied our ancestry by calling a man with a muggle father his master. He projects an image of power, yet last year an eleven year old Harry Crow destroyed him -before his goblin father finished the job. He preaches nothing is more important than family, then leaves his own son in a deadly situation - a situation which he deliberately created. I just don't know which way is up at the moment, Pansy."

She laid Draco's head on her lap and encouraged him to stretch out on the sofa. As Pansy ran her fingers through Draco's hair, he closed his eyes and considered the other side of the coin. "Crow is supposed to be my enemy yet he confuses the hell out of me. That day in the great hall when I called him a thieving goblin bastard, he had me. Reporting that to his father would have seen me barred from Gringotts, and we both know what that would mean. I got the impression Crow understood exactly what that would mean too, yet he gave me an easy out. We both also know we would only need to ask and defence lessons from Professor Weasley would be available too, it was our choice to give it a miss. Then there was the Merlin Ball..."

Pansy held her silence, knowing Draco needed to get this off his chest. "We both know I wouldn't have stood an earthly of receiving any new dress robes from home, while Ron Weasley would probably been able to afford a set now. Crow provided tailoring for all of us so everyone was the same, and must have paid out a fortune to do so. Pansy, that was one of the best parties I've ever attended, everyone had a great time. Blaise even managed to bag a seat at Crow's table, and he was welcomed there."

All the Slytherins had noticed the changes in the castle this year, and not all of them were against those changes. Draco appeared to be slowly coming around to that point of view. "Everyone who has gone up against Crow has come off worse. My father, Slughorn, that

massive goblin with the axe, even Dumbledore has seen his reputation destroyed. Kicked out of the Wizengamot and now Hogwarts. Crow has an untouchable power base and could easily lord it over Hogwarts, yet he seems to have no interest in doing so. All he does is train and train, and that worries me..."

He needed a moment to consider how far he wanted to take this. Since he'd started unburdening his soul, Draco was actually feeling better. This step though was tantamount to blasphemy, the kind of sin that could see you burned at the stake - or tortured to death. "We have been taught that the dark lord is all powerful, all the evidence we've learned lately points to that not being true. It's now an established fact his father was a muggle, and not even my father disputes a fifteen month old Harry Potter defeated Voldemort."

The confused wizard needed a moment before continuing. "Crow can do things with those blades of his that scares the shit out of me, and I certainly believe him when he says the goblins and the ministry will back him in his fight against the dark lord. What if he wins?"

"I don't understand, Draco."

"If he defeats the dark lord for a second time, they will probably make him King or something. Whatever they do, he would certainly not be someone you wanted as an enemy. Father thinks he's being so clever, yet the people Crow has behind him destroyed Dumbledore - something neither Voldemort or Grindelwald were able to do at the height of their powers."

This just confused Pansy even more. "I still don't understand what you're getting at, Draco."

"Whatever father has done, I believe he's going to be caught. Between the more efficient ministry and this new alliance with the goblins, everything points to that outcome - with only my father not being able to recognise this. I also think mother and I have to give him the same support he gave me at Hogwarts over this scheme of his - none. He left me to face whatever he's unleashed in that castle, we'll need to leave him to face the backlash of those actions alone. I just hope mother and I can survive it, and then choose the right side."

Rita had followed her instincts, as well as Draco through the floo. Those instincts were now paying dividends. With the two senior Malfoys barely speaking to each other, there was nothing for her to overhear. Today had been a pure mine of information, just not a rich enough seam yet to supply her with those ten thousand golden galleons. Rita was confident though there would be a break in this story soon.

-oOoOo-

It was an angry Neville who broke the silence in Myrtle's toilet, stoutly springing to Padma's defence. "That's impossible! When Luna was petrified, Padma wasn't even in Scotland. She spent Halloween dancing with me at Longbottom Manor. We were all there, even Professor Hobson. I don't know who you saw but it certainly wasn't Padma."

Myrtle didn't take too kindly to her word being questioned, especially in her own patch - and in front of Harry too. "I know exactly what I saw! She hissed at that sink and it opened, then she and that ruddy giant snake went down the hole..." This saw the ghost pause at the glaring inconsistency in her story. "...but then, how could she be standing here if she's down there?"

The obvious solution hit all of them at the same time. With a scream of 'PAV!' Padma dived at the construction and attempted to rip a sink off the stone structure with her bare hands. After having no success, she was reaching for her wand when Neville and Harry grabbed her arms and pulled her back.

"Let me go, let me go - my sister is down there!"

Hermione tried to reason with her. "We know, Padma, but what does Professor Weasley always say is our most powerful weapon - our minds. We're going to need all our weapons if we're to get Parvati out of there."

Padma looked at her friends and asked the question. "You're going to help?"

Harry was deadly serious. "I count you as family, Padma, and Parvati is your sister - that makes her family too. Whatever or

whoever is controlling her has also attacked Luna, Susan and Hannah - they're not getting away with it."

The auror in Tonks made her ask the next question. "Harry, how do you know someone is controlling this girl?"

It was just as well both Harry and Neville still had hold of Padma, she was ready to spring at the auror. She settled for sending a verbal blast in her direction. "My sister is not a Parselmouth, which is why there was hissing at the sink. You also need that skill to control the basilisk..."

Both Tonks and Henrica were shocked at that revelation, leaving Harry to regret not approaching the veela last night with their theory.

"Okay, time to send for help." Harry removed his dagger and sent the come running signal to his father. "Auror Tonks, how much help can we expect from the aurors?"

"Quite a few of the aurors in the castle are trainees, I noticed at least one of the trainees petrified in the corridor. If this situation should arise, our very specific orders left no room for any misunderstandings. The castle has to be evacuated, and everyone escorted down to Hogsmeade. That will be the auror force's top priority, only after that has been accomplished are they allowed to do any investigating."

Henrica chipped in with her take on the evacuation. "I told McGonagall I would get you four out of here, so they will only be missing one student."

Tonks then gave her professional opinion of the current situation. "They won't halt the evacuation for one missing student, rather get everyone else to Hogsmeade and then send a squad back to search for her."

"It will take my father the best part of an hour to gather squads and then get to Hogwarts."

"Pav might not have that long, Harry."

"We're not going to be standing about doing nothing, Padma..."

It was Henrica who interrupted. "Harry, we need to wait until the others get here..."

"We need to get this thing open. Until we do, there's no point in arguing over anything else at the moment."

Everyone could see the merit in Harry's argument but it was Hermione who pointed out the obvious. "You're right, but how do we get it open? None of us speak Parseltongue."

The Lady Helena then provided Hermione with an answer. "Harry is Hogwarts' Champion, all doors should open for him - even ancient ones."

Deciding to give it a try, Harry placed his hands on the nearest sink before issuing a demand. "Hogwarts, your champion commands this door to open."

They all heard the screech of stone straining to move against stone, but the sinks didn't budge an inch. Harry again commanded the door to open, again the screeching but no opening.

Harry drew his sword and held it vertically in front of him, almost as a badge of office. "Hogwarts, your champion commands this door to open." This time magic sparked from the sword to battle the ancient parselmouth magic that was denying access, brilliant colourful flashes of magic continually jumped between the sword and the stone structure containing the sinks. It slowly crept open as the maelstrom of wild magic lit up the entire toilet.

Every hair on Tonks' body was standing to attention from the amount of magic that was in the air, she'd never even heard of such power before - far less witnessed it. "Harry, what kind of spell was that? I've never seen anything like it!"

"That wasn't a spell, and it wasn't me. Hogwarts just channeled magic through Godric's blade to overpower the Parselmouth enchantment that secured the opening. Now, I need everyone to cast their strongest shields."

The auror was about to ask why when she noticed that everyone else just obeyed Harry's order, she followed suit. As the last piece of the structure was about to sink into the floor, a surge of magic from

Harry's sword blasted it to pieces. Pieces of stone that rained down on the shields they had erected, his three friends ensuring their shields overlapped to cover Harry too.

"That should stop it closing and now we can argue about what comes next." Harry hardly had the words out his mouth before Padma butted in.

"That's my sister down there, no one is stopping me going down after her."

"No one is trying to stop you, Padma, what we need though is a plan that's more evolved than jumping in there and shouting for Parvati at the top of your voice. If we don't have one, then we need to wait for reinforcements." Padma was smart enough to understand Harry's reasoning, she still didn't like it though.

Tonks didn't like this idea of entering the chamber at all, and tried to dissuade Harry. "We don't know what's down there, or have any idea of what we'll face. It's madness to go any further without reinforcements."

"My sister might not have that time to wait, we saw the message written on the corridor wall. Just whose skeleton do you think that message was referring to?"

"Auror Tonks, we will need someone to stay behind and lead the others to us. My father will bring every blade he can while Amelia will want a piece of whatever did that to Susan."

Harry's words hit Tonks where it hurt. "If you think this auror is going to stand here while four kids go down there without her, then your crazier than a drunk Peeves."

Henrica tried to reason with him. "Harry, the parents are going to hit the roof if you pull this stunt. It will make that incident this summer seem like a picnic!" She was focusing on his mate, and trying to make him see the consequences of this. His mate though had not been idle, Hermione was working on a viable solution to their basilisk problem. She'd transfigured one of the stones Harry had shattered into something they all recognised from their holidays over the summer.

The witch in question slipped on the pair of mirror sunglasses she'd just transfigured. "If we can create a strong enough light to temporally blind it, that should also disrupt the magical focus of its eyes. We all studied and practiced that spell Slughorn cast on you, that should certainly disrupt it for a moment or two. Then, it's a speed and accuracy drill as we aim for its eyes."

Harry so wanted to hug his mate, but Padma beat him to it. "Hermione, that's so bloody crazy it just might work!" Hermione's attention though was still focused on Harry. "You need me down there, Harry. Apart from its eyes, this thing will be practically impervious to magic. We're gonna need our swords to fight this thing, and I'm never passing mine off to anyone else."

With a nod, Harry turned his attention to Neville. The Gryffindor had his answer all ready. "I would rather face what's down there than be left up here to tell Barchoke and Amelia you three jumped into that."

Henrica didn't even give Harry time to attempt to sideline her. "This is Hogwarts and I am a professor, technically in charge of you lot. I may not be able to stop you going, but I can at least go with you to help keep you four out of trouble - down there and when we come back up."

All four appreciated that, they knew the trouble that would await when their parents caught up with the group. The Lady Ravenclaw solved their other problem.

"The Baron will lead the rescue parties here, while I will accompany you. Since the basilisk cannot kill me, I shall take the lead and hope to supply you with at least a warning."

Hermione was dishing out the pairs of mirror sunglasses she'd transfigured and, as they got ready to slide down the chute, even Tonks had to admit they had a plan of action that was better than anything she could come up with on the spur of the moment.

With the Ravenclaw ghost taking the lead, Tonks was going to bring up the rear - hoping to ensure they didn't get ambushed from behind. She understood what Henrica was doing by talking about the trouble they would be in when they came back up. Personally, the auror thought it would be a miracle if they all came out of this alive. She really wished they would wait for the reinforcements to get here but

Tonks was under no illusion she could actually stop them. She'd watched Harry and Hermione train with those blades or magic every morning, add in their two friends and Henrica and Tonks knew she would be quickly overpowered. The best she could do was try and keep them safe, and hope the help got here as quickly as possible.

-oOoOo-

The mass goblin arrival outside Hogwarts was actually greeted with cheers from the students who were being led down to Hogsmeade. The seventy goblins Barchoke had brought with him were in full armour, and ready for battle - they were indeed a stirring sight.

The sight that stopped this force in their tracks was the petrified children being levitated toward the village, Barchoke couldn't fail to notice Susan and Hannah amongst the victims. Amelia storming toward him with a dozen aurors in tow was pretty unmissable too, she appeared ready, willing and able to tackle a dragon with her bare hands.

Stopping only to confirm the victims were indeed petrified, and therefore still alive, she and her aurors headed straight for Barchoke's force. The Goblin Ambassador bowed to the lady warrior. "Madam Bones - Amelia, I want you to know we are desperately sorry for what happened here and stand ready to help in any way we can. The nation also has a slight stock of the mandrake potion, enough to see all the children back to normal before this day is out. Your aurors may have to wait a day or two until we can acquire some more mature mandrake."

"On behalf of all the parents, and the ministry, you have my thanks." Amelia had learned enough about Barchoke during the summer to know the thanks of the parents would mean a lot more to him than any words the ministry had. Looking at the force he had assembled, she had to ask the obvious. "Have you any idea what caused this?"

"Sorry, but no. Harry transmitted our strongest emergency signal, it basically means 'grab as many warriors as you can and get here quickly'. I can only assume he knows what we'll be facing, but see no sign of him or the others." Both knew where Harry went, the other three wouldn't be far behind.



Amelia made the only decision she could. "I can't take any aurors away from escorting the students to Hogsmeade, this squad was all I could muster from the ministry at short notice. The minister is gathering a larger force and will be here in an hour or so. We are merely an advanced party and would certainly be prepared to follow your lead in this matter."

They resumed marching toward the castle, both knowing they would need more information before making further plans. Minerva McGonagall was bringing up the rear of the train of students winding their way down to Hogsmeade, the clearly agitated witch rushed toward them.

"Barchoke, I think Harry and his friends are still in the castle. The alarm sounded when they would have been exercising. Padma and Neville made sure Luna and Colin got down to the hall before leaving with Henrica to search for them. All three point blank refused to leave the castle without Harry and Hermione."

This was not a shock to the goblin, he'd been expecting his son to be in the thick of it. Harry would never have sent that level of distress call otherwise. "Professor, Sirius arranged with Auror Tonks that she would accompany the pair to and from their morning training. Wherever they are, they have Henrica and the auror for company. Is there anyone else missing?"

"Miss Brown reported Parvati Patil was feeling under the weather this morning and rushed into a bathroom as they made their way down from the great hall. She's unaccounted for and a message was left on the corridor wall, again in blood. Her skeleton will lie in the chamber for eternity. Since she is the only student unaccounted for, I fear she has been taken."

"Harry will be going after her, I just hope he can talk his friends out of accompanying him. I fear though that Padma will never accept that - and the other two will be just as stubborn."

Both Minerva and Amelia now stared at the goblin as if he was crazy, Barchoke though knew his son. "His message was our highest priority call for help, it makes sense now. We'll have to hurry and just hope we're not too late, where is this bathroom?"

"It's the one that Myrtle haunts, it's on..."

"It's okay, Professor, I know exactly where it is. I can lead us straight there." Bill had been heading to the castle for his usual Saturday morning lesson when he'd come upon the evacuation. Seeing Percy riding herd on his four younger siblings meant the prefect was going to be receiving an extra special Christmas gift from his eldest brother this year. Now that his heart was once more beating normally, Bill had rushed toward the castle, coming upon the present group just as Barchoke was speculating Harry had went after the lost girl. He also thought that was the most likely outcome, and agreed with Barchoke that the other three wouldn't let him go alone. With Bill now beside his boss and Amelia, they raced for the castle gates.

-oOoOo-

The bones crunching under their feet meant that any attempt at stealth was doomed to failure. Harry though was pleased with this, explaining to the group that this effect worked both ways. He was a lot more worried about a basilisk sneaking up on them than making a noise as they made their way down the tunnel.

Tonks was bringing up the rear and drew comfort from that remark. She was forced to acknowledge to herself that Harry was in command here, from the simple fact that the rest of them followed his orders without question. She would have been pelted with rocks from the explosion in the bathroom if she'd wasted time questioning his order. Tonks was relieved to see though that Harry took to command as if born to it.

That relief vanished when Helena let out a shriek, closely followed by her assurance that she was alright. When Tonks finally came upon the shed skin of the beast, the auror though it was easily scary enough to frighten a ghost - it scared the shit out of her.

Harry had his sword out, examining the skin closely. His swipe easily cut through the skin, and then he invited Hermione to do the same. "This is an old skin, so the actual basilisk will be bigger than this. Once we take out its eyes, we need to stay away from its head, one scratch from those fangs and it's all over. This is going to be brutal, we'll need to take this down a piece at a time. Attack and withdraw until blood loss slows it down enough and allows us the opportunity to administer a killing stroke."

Hermione knew Harry was basically asking her if she had the stomach for this, she took out her blade and sliced at the skin. It certainly took more effort than practicing with the dummies, and she was sure this would give her nightmares for years, but she had every intention of fighting at Harry's side today. This was why Hermione trained so hard, she never wanted to stand there helpless again while Harry was forced to fight for their lives.

"I can do this, Harry."

Padma then added her two knuts worth. "We can act as decoys, get it chasing after us and then you can attack it."

"That's too dangerous, Padma. This thing is a killing machine..."

"...which is going to forget all about annoying little old me the moment one of you two sticks their sword into its gut. You will then need us again to pull it off you, before the other one stabs the bugger again. Like Hermione said, we can do this, Harry."

Harry's nod of agreement to Padma saw Tonks lose her temper. "This is bloody crazy! It's one thing to cut up a chunk of dead skin, your going to be taking on a deadly creature in its own home..."

"We know that, Auror Tonks. We are also aware a plan rarely survives past the initial contact. It is always better though to have a plan you can adapt, rather than step into the unknown with nothing. Do you have any better suggestions, other than stand here and hope help arrives soon enough to save Parvati?" Tonks had no answer for Harry, he didn't think she would have. "This is purely a rescue mission, Auror, if we can grab Parvati and get the hell out of here without fighting anything - that's exactly what we'll do. Let whoever likes deal with the bloody thing. As a centurion, I have to plan for all foreseeable eventualities. That's what we're doing here."

Tonks looked toward Henrica for support but found none. "I am in the process of writing a book on goblin culture and their civilisation. Harry is a centurion and in command of this situation, I know he'll do everything in his power to get us all out of here in one piece. I also know he'll do a more capable job of that task than I could."

With that matter decided, they pushed on once more. It wasn't long before they were faced with a massive circular door, a door that was covered in carved snakes - and of course securely locked.

"This is just like the sinks in the bathroom, Harry. It's not only been locked by a Parselmouth, I can't pass through it either." It was strange for Helena to meet something 'solid' but that's exactly what this door and the surrounding walls felt like.

Harry again called on Hogwarts assistance and this time the wild magic swirled around the tunnel, all could see it was taking a lot more effort to open this door. The 'whump' behind them had all eyes and wands focused in that direction, all except Harry's. "That's a cave-in, these tunnels haven't been maintained for a millennium and I was worried about that." As the door finally swung open, Harry transfigured some bones into iron bars - using them to jam the door mechanism. "I didn't want to blast this door, that just might bring the entire roof down on us. Could you take a quick look, Auror Tonks, just to see how far away the cave-in is - and how bad?"

Tonks was back in under two minutes. "It's just around the corner, we should be able to move some of it - enough for us to squeeze through anyway."

"That will only hold my father up by a matter of minutes, are we ready to do this?"

Each person nodded to Harry as they then entered the fabled chamber of secrets.

-oOoOo-

As they entered the castle, the rescue group found a ghostly guide waiting on them. "Sir, your son discovered the entrance to the chamber of secrets, they entered in the hope of saving the young Patil witch taken down there. He jammed the entrance open so you could follow him down, and asked me to warn you the creature attacking Hogwarts students is a basilisk."

There was no face palming, whining or even questioning that information, there was though a noticeable speeding up as they raced to the entrance. As they past the afflicted ghosts, the Baron gave the company a bit more hope. "The Lady Helena accompanied

them into the chamber, she intended to lead the way - offering some protection and at least a warning to the group. I hope you will allow me to do the same for you."

Barchoke quickly agreed, before coming to a stop as they shot into the bathroom. Hermione had stuck a pair of mirror sunglasses to the wall nearest the sink, and the Baron quickly explained their plan for dealing with the creature. Amelia was most impressed, agreeing they should do the same.

"If we meet this creature, we will attempt to blind it and then provide cover while your blades bring it down."

That was the type of cooperation Barchoke liked, each playing to their strengths. They would struggle to deal with the creature's deathly gaze, while the aurors wouldn't be able to penetrate the basilisk's hide with magic.

They were soon sliding down the chute and forming ranks inside the tunnel. They proceeded cautiously until discovering the shed skin. At that point, Barchoke broke into a full run - right up until he found the cave-in. They were busily clearing a path through the rubble when a primal scream chilled everyone who heard it to their very bones.

The only shred of comfort available to the worried goblin father was that no human throat could possibly produce that sound. He scrambled through the instant the hole was big enough to allow him passage, and soon discovered Harry had jammed the next door open too. Before Barchoke could enter the chamber properly, another scream reverberated off the stone walls. Unfortunately, this one was human.

-oOoOo-

The chamber was long and dimly lit, with massive stone columns supporting a ceiling that was so high, it became lost in the darkness. These columns had snakes carved all around them, Harry though was far more interested in the cover they should hopefully provide to the rescuers, rather than any decorative function. A shiver of dread ran up his spine at the thought of playing a deadly bout of hide and seek here, weaving their way through these dimly lit columns - with a giant basilisk in lethal pursuit.

Their footsteps echoed for all to hear as they carefully progressed through these supports, eventually revealing a statue as high as the the dim and dank chamber against the back wall. Craning his neck, Harry was able to make out an ancient and almost monkeyish face. The mystery of why there were no portraits of Salazar Slytherin was now solved as far as Harry was concerned, who the hell would want to paint this ugly bugger! It was only when he spotted what was lying between the statue's massive stone feet that he knew for certain they were in serious trouble.

With a cry of 'PAV!', Padma sprinted toward her sister, dropping to her knees beside the prone figure. Henrica went with Padma as Harry directed the rest of the group to form a protective perimeter around the trio of witches while Parvati's condition was being assessed.

"Pav - don't be dead - please don't be dead " Padma grabbed her twin's shoulders and turned her over. Her face was pale and cold, yet her eyes were closed. If she wasn't petrified, then she must be... "Pav, please wake up," Muttering desperately, panic saw Padma shaking her twin. Parvati's head lolled hopelessly from side to side.

Henrica began casting the few general health diagnostic spells she knew. "Parvati's alive but very weak. I can't find any reason for her being unconscious so suggest we get her to a healer as quickly as possible."

"She won't wake," said a soft voice.

Tonks almost jumped out her skin. She was watching this area yet the dark haired Slytherin student had appeared out of nowhere. The prefect badge made him at least fifth year though he looked somewhat older, he also looked as if he wasn't quite solid. His identity was soon confirmed in the most unusual manner possible, Tonks could only equate the sound of one ghost slapping another as being similar to her wet bathing costume hitting a stone floor while she changed after swimming.

Helena was absolutely livid. "Tom Riddle, you utter bastard. What have you done to that poor girl?"

Harry knew at once who had been controlling Parvati, he switched to goblin and began shouting instructions - thankful that Henrica

received the charm from Hermione last weekend. ""Henrica, Padma, only a horcrux could be responsible for this. He's trying to drain Parvati's soul and restore his own. She must have it on her, we need to find it - and then destroy the bloody thing. Looking at Riddle, and with how weak Parvati is, we don't have much time.""

Tom was actually laughing at Helena's tirade. "The daughter of the great Rowena Ravenclaw, just as gullible as the little tramp lying over there. She wanted to be smart like her sister, all so she could get a boyfriend - pathetic creature..."

It was then Tom noticed they were searching the unconscious girl, and they appeared to know what they were looking for. "Get away from her, leave her alone." He had drawn Parvati's wand, and that was the signal for Harry to spring into action.

"Stupid boy, your sword can't hurt me, Potter."

Harry's blade swished through the air, and proved Tom right. Tom though wasn't the blade's intended target, Parvati would be requiring a new wand as Harry just cut straight through hers. He privately swore to replace it, but they would all need to come through this in one piece first.

A shout from Padma alerted him they'd found something. ""We have an old black book here that certainly didn't belong to Pav."" Both she and Henrica cast spells at it, without doing any damage. ""This must be it, not a bloody scratch on the thing! How are we going to destroy it?""

Hermione offered a frightening solution. ""Basilisk venom is one of the most deadly substances known, it will kill anything!""

Tom could clearly see what they were attempting to do, but couldn't understand a word they were saying. He threw the now useless bit of wand away. The Heir of Slytherin had intended to gloat for a while yet, inform these people of his brilliance before watching them die. They left him no choice though, but to proceed directly to the main event.

"Now, Harry, just for that, I'm going to teach you a little lesson. Let's match the powers of Lord Voldemort, Heir of Salazar Slytherin,

against famous Harry Potter Crow, and the best weapon Hogwarts can give its mischosen champion."

Helena attempted to stop him but the best she could do was slow Tom down a touch. He was soon standing in front of the ugly statue and hissing away.

Harry meanwhile was rallying his troops. "'Get Parvati up against the wall, she should be safe there. Tom won't want anything happening to her, that would certainly screw up his ritual. Remember the plan and good luck, we're going to need it.'"

Neville lifted Parvati and placed her as close to the wall as he could, Henrica conjured a small wall in front of the unconscious girl for added protection.

Changing to English, he shouted to Tonks. "Auror, if you have any improvements to our ideas, now would be a good time to tell us."

Looking at how solid Tom Riddle was becoming, Tonks now realised waiting on reinforcements would have cost the girl her life - and left them facing a restored Lord Voldemort. "We three take the left, the other three have the right. Aim true, hit hard - and good luck!"

That made sense to Harry as Hermione joined him, a quick kiss and they were ready to face this together.

As Padma, Neville and Henrica prepared to fire on the basilisk's right eye, Padma grabbed Neville and kissed him too, whispering 'for luck'. Both knew how dangerous the next few minutes would be, they could talk about what that kiss meant later - hopefully.

All were wearing their mirror sunglasses but under no illusion that the situation wasn't now much more dangerous than they first perceived. Should they fail to take out these eyes and end up petrified, a revitalised Lord Voldemort would soon be joining them in the chamber. None of them would be leaving here alive if that happened. Harry at least had the consolation of knowing his father was on his way here, and would certainly make a concerted effort to avenge him.

As the stone mouth of the ugly statue creaked open, they could hear the creature making its way out of its lair.



Harry steadied his troops. "Hold on people, we're only going to get one shot at this. Wait for my command ...wait ...wait ...NOW!"

Just as its snout began to appear from the mouth, six starburst charms exploded right in front of the basilisk's face. That part of their plan worked to perfection, the rest of it though quickly fell apart. The basilisk was thrashing about in agony, throwing its head about far quicker than any dummy they had ever practiced on. With more luck than skill, the group managed to burst the left eye, they could all see the basilisk recovering though and rather hopefully cast more starburst spells.

Henrica decided it was time for a different approach, she just hoped her protective mirror sunglasses transfigured along with her. She transformed into her veela avian form and shot toward the basilisk, her scaly wings soon bringing her level with the basilisk's head. Using her claws to latch on to the giant creature, a fireball left her clawed hand directly into the as yet undamaged eye. Unfortunately, having to be this close meant Henrica couldn't avoid looking into the large yellow eye. She lost consciousness, and her grip as the now blinded basilisk violently thrashed its head from side to side in severe pain.

Harry barely had time to scream 'cease fire' as Henrica in her veela form launched herself at the basilisk, and Tonks was reacting before anyone needed to tell her. She caught Henrica before the still transformed veela could hit the stone floor, and quickly levitated her over beside Parvati.

Tom was incensed, and Helena wasn't slow to push his buttons.

"Your powers don't seem that great now, do they Tom? I think our chosen champion and his friends have just acquitted themselves rather well."

An enraged Tom Riddle began screaming at the Basilisk, and you didn't need to speak parceltongue to understand the message being sent. KILL THEM!

The four friends received a jolt of positive emotion when Tonks shouted her discovery across the chamber. "Henrica's petrified, but alive!"

Harry shouted reply also contained an order. "Auror Tonks, stay there and protect those two. We'll handle the rest - you are our new plan B for Tom!" Hoping the auror was quick enough to decipher his cryptic message, he then switched to goblin.

"Padma, you're with me. Neville, your job is to pull the basilisk off Hermione." Harry hated handing his mate's safety over to anyone else but was left with no other choice, they needed to work as a team now more than ever. The four made a lot of noise as they entered the pillars, making sure the creature knew where they were and would follow them. Helena was doing her best to antagonise Riddle, distracting him from offering any directions or instructions to the beast.

Their first trap was almost their last, this creature was amazingly quick. Only Harry's armour enhanced speed saw his blade bite into the creature's side before its jaws would have snapped on Neville. He then melted into the maze of columns as Padma started shouting and firing curses at the beast from a different angle. As the enraged creature followed its natural instincts and lunged in the direction where it perceived this latest threat to be, Hermione emerged from behind another pillar to inflict a wound on the creature's other side. Neville then took over, drawing the deadly creature's attention away from Hermione and positioning the beast where Harry was ready to strike again. Padma would then play her part as the cycle repeated itself.

They were leading the basilisk by the nose, like Matadors working a bull and gradually reducing a magnificent animal to nothing more than meat for butchering. Their hit and run tactics were working perfectly, the basilisk was beginning to slow down from severe loss of blood. This factor actually proved to be their undoing though as Hermione opened another deep wound in the creature before slipping on the now bloody stone floor.

The great fanged head turned around to face her and neither Padma nor Neville could convince it to change direction once the ancient creature had locked on to its now vulnerable prey. Hermione was rather inelegantly parked on her bum, trying to push herself backwards and away from the approaching basilisk with her flailing legs and arms finding little purchase on the now slippery floor.

Harry was forced to act, he raced forward and imbedded the sword of Gryffindor into the beast right up to the blade's hilt. He then used this fabled sword to cast his most powerful blasting curse. The basilisk may have skin that was incredibly resistant to magic, but the sword was actually inside its body. A horrible scream was emitted from the beast as internal organs were reduced to mush but Harry didn't hear it.

When he used this attack on the dummies, by bracing himself it was the dummies that ended up flying across the room. Here, the sheer mass of the basilisk meant it was always going to be Harry who received the backlash from his spell, this backlash blew a large hole in the creature and saw him thrown right along the chamber. He smacked into the floor with an almighty clatter, his body being twisted into unnatural shapes as it skimmed and skidded along. Only crashing heavily into the wall finally halted his momentum.

The blast that killed the basilisk saw its head shoot forward in its death throes, unfortunately landing on the still prone Hermione's legs - crushing both and pinning her under the creature.

Tom was jubilant, the basilisk may be dead but he had still won - and that was all that mattered. He walked over as Harry fought a losing battle to remain conscious. "I'm going to stand here and watch you die, Harry Potter. Take your time, I'm in no hurry. Your last thought will be that I, as we all knew I would, have won. You and all your friends will soon be dead..."

"Hey Tom, you don't half talk a load of shit!"

Tom spun around to see the Longbottom boy had used that little witch's sword to hack a fang out of the basilisk's jaw, and was now removing a certain black book from his pocket.

"You should know that Harry doesn't stand alone against you, his friends always have his back covered. This one's for both of our parents, stay dead you murdering bastard!"

Tom managed to shout 'stop' but Neville paid him no mind, slamming the point of the basilisk fang into the diary.

There was a long, dreadful, piercing scream. Ink spurted out of the diary in torrents, running all over Neville's hands, and forming a

large puddle on the floor. Tom was writhing and twisting, screaming and flailing and then - silence!

Neville dropped the fang and raced over to Harry, he was kneeling beside his friend as he muttered the question Neville knew was coming.

"Hermione?"

"The basilisk landed on her legs, probably breaking both of them. Padma's with her now and Hermione's far more worried about you."

Harry managed an 'I'm fine' before passing out. Helena couldn't miss the worry on Neville's face and offered up some reassurance.

"That magnificent armour our champion possesses has just saved his life, he'll certainly need to visit the infirmary but both he and his mate will be ready to dance again by this time next week."

Knowing both girls would be desperate to hear from him, Neville shouted the news over since the body of the basilisk was hiding them from his line of sight. "Harry's battered and bruised, possibly a few broken bones but his armour protected him from more serious injury. He's just passed out."

Hermione's head was now being gently cradled on Padma's lap as her friend also held onto her hand. While Padma was doing her best to offer some comfort, Hermione understood that not knowing her sister's fate must be eating away at the witch. "Go and check on Parvati, I'll still be here when you get back!"

"Hey Granger, I do the jokes, you slice up the massive deadly beasts - that's the deal, remember."

Tonks voice then rang around the chamber. "Parvati's beginning to wake up, I think she's going to be okay."

This proved to be the trigger for both girls to release their tears, Hermione might be in a lot of pain but the tears flowing down her cheeks were those of relief. They may not all be walking out of here but they were all alive, none of them really believed that outcome was likely - or even if it was remotely possible.

She found her other hand now being held by Barchoke, the goblin making no attempt to hide his own tears. ""Well met, father, I can't tell you how happy I am to see you again. Please check on our Harry, I can't see him from here and it's driving me crazy.""

With extreme care, the goblin very gently traded places with Padma, releasing her to race over and check on her twin. ""I'm staying right here my oh so brave daughter, there are two healers currently checking on him. Amelia is also here with her aurors, so everyone will be okay. The healers will be with you soon, we just need to work out the best way to get this thing off of you first.""

Harry was then carried over on a stretcher by four centurions and placed beside his still trapped mate. This was a heartfelt tribute of respect by their comrades - saluting their courage for tackling and then defeating a beast such as this. Both the centurion and his mate were covered in the residue of what must have been a titanic battle, and their bloody swords were respectfully positioned between them.

The looks of appreciation and even awe heading in the direction of the father and his two children from those in the chamber were something that should have been savoured. Barchoke though never took his gaze from his son and daughter as solutions were being feverishly discussed on how to move the biggest bloody basilisk in recorded history off Hermione.

Harry was still unconscious but just seeing he was alive settled Hermione. None of the people urgently milling around them mattered now, Harry was back where he belonged - beside her.

Their father had brought enough goblins along to physically lift this bloody thing off her if they had to, now all she and Harry needed to worry about was telling their mum and dad.

A/N Thanks for reading

## Chapter 46

A pleasant Saturday morning spent shopping was instantly forgotten about as the Grangers entered their home, only to find Sirius impatiently waiting on them. "Where the hell have you been?"

Seeing how distressed Sirius was immediately alerted both parents something had to be seriously wrong. Dan didn't mess about with any pleasantries either. "Has there been another attack?"

"Yes, between the attack and the aftermath, Hermione, Harry and Henrica are all in the Hogwarts infirmary. None of them are critical and the problem has been dealt with. That's all the information I was given, and I've been going nuts waiting on you two arriving home. We need to head to Hogwarts right away."

Emma was too shocked at that news to say anything, she actually felt her head beginning to spin. Dan soon had an arm around his wife, offering his support as their shopping now lay forgotten around them. "We both obviously want to go but how are we supposed to do that? I thought we couldn't even see Hogwarts?"

Sirius was already slipping a bracelet onto Emma's wrist before handing one to Dan. "These will neutralise the muggle-repelling wards and allow you inside the castle. I also have a portkey here that will take us to the edge of the wards. Bill Weasley passed me these through the floo, along with telling me to get you two to Hogwarts as quickly as possible. Apparently it was pandemonium there when he called, Bill didn't have time to tell me any more. Are you ready?"

Since they hadn't even take their coats off, both Grangers quickly agreed. It seemed only a moment later that they were picking themselves up off the grass on a Scottish hillside, and staring at a magnificent castle that could only be Hogwarts. A small silvery dog-shaped wisp left Sirius' wand and shot toward the castle.

"That was a message spell, Barchoke wanted to know the moment we arrived." Sirius noticed the place was crawling with aurors, and even saw a squad of fully armoured goblins in the courtyard as they entered the castle gates. "Whatever the trouble was appears to really be over. If the amount of people now guarding Hogwarts is any indication, whatever happened must have been really big."

"Would you like to bet that our lot were right in the bloody middle of whatever happened?" Dan got no takers for that, both Sirius and Emma thought he was probably right.

They entered the main doors to find Barchoke heading toward them. "How are they? Can we see them?"

"Emma, they're all going to be fine and will probably be back training by next weekend. We need to have a quick private chat before you go in to see them, you need to know what you'll be walking into."

Dan wanted to see Hermione, and he wanted to see her now. "Can't we just see them first, and talk later?"

"There are things you really need to know first, you are all just going to have to trust me for now. We can and will go through what happened in much greater detail later but there are changes you need to be aware of before entering the infirmary."

Directing them to the nearest classroom, Barchoke had the worried trio sit before starting the story. "There was an attack this morning, I think the final count was three aurors and nine students petrified - Susan and Hannah were amongst them. Our group had been researching what might be doing the attacking, last night they came up with a probable answer that has since been proven correct - a basilisk."

This saw Sirius drop his head into his hands. "Please, please don't tell me they were involved with a basilisk?"

"That's not the half of it, Sirius, a horcrux belonging to Tom Riddle had possessed a student to control the beast, they had to deal with that too." Barchoke then had to offer an explanation to the Grangers just what a basilisk was, both Dan and Emma now understood the goblin insisting they sat down.

"The message left on the wall this time read 'her skeleton will lie in the chamber forever', that skeleton would have belonged to Parvati Patil."

Emma was now openly weeping for the poor girl as Barchoke continued the story. "They had discovered the entrance to the

chamber as the castle was being evacuated. Harry had sent a signal to me that they were in trouble and knew I'd be along as quickly as I could - they didn't know if that would be quick enough to save Parvati - turns out we probably wouldn't have gotten here in time."

Dan was now trying to console his sobbing wife. They obviously knew Padma better but were still more than acquainted with her twin. He was also beginning to appreciate the bind their kids had been in.

"They had a plan, a bloody good one, an auror, the Ravenclaw ghost and Henrica too for company - they obviously decided to try and rescue Parvati." The goblin then turned his attention specifically to the marauder. "You have to see this basilisk to believe the bloody size of the thing, Sirius, their plan managed to safely take out one of its deadly eyes. Henrica transformed into her avian veela form and attacked the other eye, putting her life on the line to buy them a chance. She's currently petrified but you should have her back in the next few hours. Sirius, Henrica Hobson is a lady you wouldn't want to get away from you!"

The marauder could only nod in agreement, words currently failed him.

It was to the Grangers that Barchoke addressed the rest of the story. "With Auror Tonks having to protect an unconscious Parvati and a petrified Henrica, the four then led the blinded basilisk on a not so merry dance. Harry and Hermione were slowly bringing it down with repeated wounds from their swords when their luck ran out, Hermione was retreating when she slipped on a patch of its blood they'd spilled earlier. Seeing her in trouble forced Harry to finish the creature off, he jammed his sword into the beast and cast a blasting curse..."

Sirius understood immediately what the consequences of that would be. "I take it he got hit with the spell backlash?"

"Blew him straight across the chamber like one of those duelling dummies he's so fond of wrecking. It also saw the beast's head land on Hermione, thankfully its fangs came no where near our girl but it still managed to crush both her legs..."



Dan was on his feet before even realising he'd moved. "WHAT! You told us she was okay, having both legs crushed certainly isn't classified as okay in my book."

There was steel in Barchoke's voice now. "You're forgetting, Dan, we're working from different books here. The shattered bones have already been vanished from her legs and a potion is currently repairing the soft tissue damage. Tonight, she'll drink another potion that will regrow all the bones in her legs. Hermione will be up and walking within forty eight hours."

This took the wind out of Dan's sails and he sat back down, Barchoke never let up though. "I raced into that chamber to find Neville kneeling over our unmoving son, while Padma cradled our trapped daughter's head in her lap. Both our children were literally covered in blood and I feared the very worst. I had seventy fully armed goblins behind me, Amelia brought along a dozen aurors. If we'd had to fight that thing, neither of us would have expected to do so without taking casualties. That they not only defeated the beast, with Neville destroying the horcrux for good measure, and they all made it out of there alive is a major cause for celebration."

Now came the news that the goblin was unsure how the Grangers would react to. "They are being hailed as heroes, and rightly so. The Hogwarts infirmary is under goblin control and nothing will get anywhere near our family while they are in there. My nation places great value on bravery and honour, and they have taken our courageous daughter to their hearts. So much so that she currently has a centurion guard of honour in the infirmary, guards who will react instantly to any form of threat."

Something about the way Barchoke said that last sentence bothered Dan. "While I am delighted Hermione is protected, what exactly did you mean by that last remark?"

The goblin Ambassador left no room for ambiguity, Dan needed to understand exactly what was being said here. "Should anyone begin shouting at Hermione, they will treat that as at least insulting - and at worse threatening. She is the mate of a centurion, a friend of our nation and a heroine in her own right. Harry's fellow centurions will protect her until he is once more able to do so himself."

As Barchoke expected, Dan appeared shocked by that. Better shocked though than having a goblin blade at his throat. Emma nodded to Barchoke that she understood, and would have a tight rein on Dan. There was also something she wanted to ask. "How is Harry?"

"It may actually be easier to list the bones he hasn't broken. He's still unconscious but should awaken shortly. He too should be healed within forty eight hours." Barchoke then offered Dan an olive branch. "The Minister of Magic is already in the castle, with the director making his way here later. There will be a party going down to the chamber to see exactly what happened, I'm inviting you and Sirius to be part of that party. Perhaps seeing it for yourself will give you a better appreciation of exactly what our children have gone through."

Dan then turned sheepishly to his wife. "Am I really that bad?"

Reaching for her husband's hand, Emma tried her best to allay Dan's fears of being a poor father. "Bad is totally the wrong word to use here, Dan. Our daughter is now part of a different world, adjust how you express your genuine concern for her safety and you'll be fine. With Parvati already down there and in grave danger, nothing short of physical restraints would have stopped Padma trying to save her sister. We all know Harry wouldn't have wanted to take any of them into the chamber with him, just as we know Hermione would have pushed to be included."

No one could disagree with Emma's assessment, though the mother wasn't finished displaying her insight quite yet. "Hermione will be lying up there, worried about Harry and our reaction to this. I say we wait until everyone has had a chance to cool down, and they've had a chance to heal, before we sit down as a family and discuss exactly what happened. They're all still with us and I'll settle for that at the moment, I just want to see them now."

This outcome delighted Barchoke, while it could be considered cruel to keep a father apart from his daughter, an enraged Dan couldn't be allowed anywhere near Hermione under the current situation. He rose to lead them to the infirmary. "Neville and Padma are being treated for battle fatigue while our mind healers are working with Parvati - mainly to ensure that horcrux left no permanent damage. Ramrao, Smita and Augusta are already here, their reactions to this are pretty similar to our own. We may want to include them in our

family discussion. Sirius, I already count Henrica as family, she more than earned that right today. A final decision has yet to be reached but the ministry will have to prove Hogwarts is safe before students can return, that won't happen today. Once these two are fit to travel they will be heading home." All knew they would discuss exactly where home was later.

Dan noticed the stares from everyone they passed, be they auror or goblin. He asked Barchoke about it. "They all know who you are, the pictures in the Prophet of the ministry's ball made sure of that. They also now know what four second year students accomplished, that is why they stare."

The increased security told them they were approaching the infirmary, and the stares were now accompanied by respectful nods or salutes. Emma felt as if she was taking a step back into the health service of the fifties, the infirmary so reminded her of an NHS hospital ward from that period - especially the proliferation of portable screens that cordoned areas off. It was to one of these areas, guarded by a pair of centurions, Barchoke led them. Laying eyes on her daughter saw everything else pushed to the back of her mind as she dived to Hermione's bed.

Dan was left to stand and watch as both his girls were in floods of tears while holding each other tightly. He couldn't go around to the other side of his daughter's bed for the simple reason that Harry's was jammed tightly up against it - Hermione had been holding his hand as they entered the infirmary. Any residual anger Dan had toward Harry for placing his daughter in danger vanished with his first glance at the unconscious boy, Harry appeared as if he'd been run over by a bus in his efforts to save Hermione. If magical medicine could get Harry back on his feet in forty-eight hours then Dan would be really impressed.

Barchoke nudged Sirius. "Henrica is in the next section to this. Hermione's going to be busy for a while and Harry's still out, she needs to see a friendly face when she becomes unpetrified - the last thing she saw wouldn't have been exactly pleasant."

Nodding, Sirius left.

-oOoOo-

Neville couldn't stand the silence any longer. "Gran, if you want to shout at me then go ahead. I knew I would be in trouble but went anyway - they needed me down there."

"Neville, part of me wants to rant, rave and ground you until you're of age, another part of me wants to stand proud and shout your achievements to the entire world. I'll make that stupid brother of mine eat those squib comments, Algie will not be the only one swallowing their words now. The biggest part of me though is simply terrified with the thought I could have lost you. We're slowly getting your mum and dad back, to lose you now would kill me."

Watching the tears run down his gran's cheeks as she sat beside his bed saw Neville rise and take his grandmother in his arms.

Augusta felt as if she was cast adrift in the sea of uncertainty, the fixed points she'd steered their lives by were shifting to different orbits. Every safe harbour of familiarity and truth had been dragged below the waves by cataclysmic events in the lives of the Longbottoms. Ever since her grandson had boarded the Hogwarts express, their lives had been undergoing dramatic changes. Amelia had spoken to her before she'd entered the infirmary, having received a report from her auror who'd been down there fighting alongside her grandson. Part of that information was so unbelievable to Augusta, it was eating away at the old witch - so she just had to ask if it was true.

"Neville, did you really face down you-know-who, and then destroy him?"

"His name is Tom Riddle, gran, and that's who was responsible for all this. He was standing over Harry and gloating, forgetting all about the rest of us. He'll remember the Longbottom name from now on..."

The stoic Augusta Longbottom broke at that, she was sobbing in a mixture of relief and pride as she clung to her godson. Frank and Alice though would need to be a lot further on in their recovery before this incident would ever be mentioned in their presence.

-oOoOo-

Ramrao was sitting beside his daughter's bed, chatting with Padma about nonsensical and inconsequential things. This was a clear case

of talking about anything, rather than mention the elephant in the room - or, in this situation, on the other side of the privacy screens.

The goblin mind healers were checking Parvati over to ensure there was no lasting damage from her possession by the horcrux. Smita was in there with her, with both father and twin sister anxiously awaiting Parvati's results.

Smita entered with tears in her eyes, neither drew any meaning from that - Smita had been in tears since arriving in the infirmary. "The healers say she'll be fine. All we need to do now is get her to open up about the whole experience..."

That was Padma's cue, she was out her bed and out of there before either parent could say another word. Ramrao drew his wife into his arms. "Let her go. If anyone can handle Parvati in this situation, it's Padma. We'll just have to listen-in."

She found her sister curled up in the foetal position and facing away from her. "Pav, stop being a bed hog and bunch over, this floor is bloody freezing - and you know where I'll put my feet to heat them up."

She budged over but still kept her back turned, even when Padma tried to provoke a reaction by running her cold feet down the back of Parvati's legs. She settled for snuggling into her twin, waiting on Parvati speaking first. After all, Padma was supposed to be the quiet one.

It took a few minutes but there was finally a response. "How can you stand to be close to me, after what I've done."

"You didn't do anything, it was that bastard Tom Riddle. Anyway, before I hit the shower earlier, no one would have been in the same room as me. I can give you some beauty tips for a change, basilisk blood does absolutely nothing for your hair or complexion. Don't worry about Riddle though, Neville settled that score. He slammed a basilisk fang right through that stupid book, where did you get it anyway?"

"I thought it was from Harry..."

"Harry?"

"Remember on the express, he was handing out that pile of Dumbledore books. I was sticking them in my pockets and left with an armful too. I kept one in my pocket for myself, and found that book in there as well. It was blank so I decided to use it as a diary, then it started answering me back..."

Parvati could feel her sister stiffen at that news. "I know, I know, bloody stupid or what? How to prove I wasn't Ravenclaw material. I thought it was some kind of goblin teaching aid, I asked a question - it provided the right answer. I thought this might be one of the reasons why Harry was so smart, and all the good wizards seem to be drooling over the smart witches. I didn't realise I was soon answering more questions than I asked, it was just like gossiping to a friend - a friend who would keep your secrets. It seemed very interested in Harry though, now I know why."

After a few moments of silence, Padma prompted her sister to continue. "What happened next, Pav?"

"I wanted to be smart like you, the book said it could help and began teaching me meditation. I started losing hours at a time though, hours I had no memory of, and falling behind on my homework too - so I stopped using it. Hermione's party being canceled had me so angry I needed to meditate again - I was almost sick with nerves but had actually approached a boy and asked him for a date to that party."

A comforting squeeze from her twin gave Parvati the courage to continue her tale. "Fortunately, Blaise was very good about it and asked me to the Merlin ball as his date, we both know how that night ended. When you left at Halloween I meditated for most of the day, and later discovered what happened to Luna. I felt ill and had my suspicions, but by that time though it was as if I was under some sort of incredibly strong compulsion charm - I just couldn't put the book down..."

"I know exactly how that feels, Pav, I've come across one of them before..."

This saw Parvati turn around and stare right into her twin's eyes. "You wouldn't lie to me, Padma, not about this - please!"

"Last year, the four of us, with Professor Weasley and Henrica, went searching for one we knew was inside Hogwarts - it was Ravenclaw's Diadem. The instant I saw it, I wanted to rush forward and put it on. Neville had to drag me away while Professor Weasley put it in a container and took the thing to Gringotts. They have a way to kill the horcrux that doesn't involve fighting a bloody basilisk."

"I can't believe you came down there after me..."

"You're my sister, of course I was coming after you. Harry simply said you were family, I think we both know you never, ever want to mess with any of his family."

"How am I going to face them after what happened?"

"Again, Pav, I know exactly how you feel. We were waiting on that basilisk making an appearance, and I didn't know if I would ever get another chance, so I just grabbed Neville and kissed his socks off!"

"You didn't?"

"Well, I never actually checked to see if his socks were still on his feet, but I certainly kissed him."

A moment's silence followed before the inevitable question was asked. "What was it like?"

At that, Smita pulled Ramrao away. She was overjoyed to hear her girls chatting about normal things like boys, anything was better than dark lord possessions and basilisks. Here was the first hopeful sign that their family could come through this ordeal and be whole again.

-oOoOo-

Sirius was sitting by a petrified Henrica's bed and trying to forge a safe path for himself through the emotional turmoil he was currently experiencing, a task that was proving to be far easier said than done. The three most important people in the world to Sirius Black had all courted with death in this morning's battle, and escaped her final fatal embrace by the skin of their teeth. That was enough to scramble anyone's emotions and toss them in a pan to cook. The marauder then attempted to look at each of the three cases

individually and see if that helped focus his thoughts on the matter, he found the first part was relatively easy.

He had loved Harry James Potter from the instant the baby was placed in his arms. Sirius had literally felt something inside him 'shift' at that moment, his outlook on the world had just been radically altered. Up until then, babies were something witches giggled about to each other, and being parentally involved in the manufacturing of one was something to be avoided at all costs - practicing the fabrication method with a willing partner though was fine. Holding his godson in his arms radically changed those views. With the right witch, this particular result was now something to actually be desired - not feared.

That his godson had already found the right witch for himself was no longer in any doubt, and the love Sirius had for Harry had easily expanded to include his beautiful and brilliant mate, Hermione Granger. Watching that young couple grow really was one of the few highlights of his life. Being two for two, Sirius now turned his attention to the veela lying on the bed.

With Henrica petrified in her avian form, here was all the visual proof you could ever want of her veela heritage. It was only after discovering that his hand had unknowingly slipped into her claw that Sirius smiled at this subconscious confirmation of what he was only now beginning to realise. Irrespective of her form - Sirius Black was head over heels in love with Henrica Hobson.

It was hard to put any kind of measurement on how much you would miss someone but, by a simple comparison, Sirius knew he would have mourned the passing of this witch at least as much as the other two people he could so easily admit to loving. Shit, even the bloody goblin could see what was right in front of Sirius' eyes!

At that, Henrica literally began to change right in front of Sirius' eyes. As the potion in her body slowly battled the petrification, it also allowed that same body to revert back to its original form. As arms and legs straightened out from their unnaturally frozen positions, they also transformed until Sirius was once more holding his girlfriend's beautifully manicured hand.

When Henrica had entirely regained her own form, she once more began to breath and Sirius reached out to remove her sunglasses.



"Careful with those, love, I really want to keep them. They seem to have saved my life..."

At that, Sirius leaned forward and gently kissed her lips. "...and you saved everyone else's."

Henrica released a small sob of relief at hearing that news. "Oh thank goodness for that. You looked so serious, I was afraid to ask."

It was a measure of how serious Sirius was treating the situation that he never even reacted to his favourite pun. "I was so serious because I was too afraid to ask. Nearly losing you showed me a far greater fear, I can't lose you again. Henrica, will you marry me?" For a moment, Sirius thought the petrification curse had returned, Henrica didn't move a muscle. Then her face broke into the most beautiful smile the marauder had ever seen.

"Only if you're ready, Sirius. I will wait, you know."

"I think I've always been ready, I just needed to find the right person to be ready with..."

"...and all I had to do was fight a basilisk to make me the right person?"

Sirius loved how Henrica could be playful, even at a time like this. It was just one of the many things he was finding to love about this witch. "I was suddenly given a glimpse of what my life would be without you in it, it was not a pretty picture."

"I'm sorry, Sirius, I did try to talk them out of going down there. I would have needed to stun Padma to stop her, that would never work with those two boys there - protective doesn't quite cover it. That godson of yours also has a way of making the impossible seem probable, I think it's because he keeps making the impossible bloody happen."

"So you went with them, and kept them all safe - I am so proud of you." This was punctuated with another kiss before Sirius continued. "Last year, Christmas was rubbish as usual but Boxing Day was very good to me. I think celebrating the anniversary of when my new life began with an engagement party would really be fitting. I know

you have a lot of commitments next summer, but could you fit a wedding in there somewhere?"

"Sirius, I haven't said yes yet."

"Well hurry up woman, and stop leaving me hanging here."

"What's your hurry? We have the rest of our lives together."

As Henrica pulled him down for a kiss, Sirius just took that as a veela's way of saying yes.

-oOoOo-

Harry slowly regained consciousness, his eyes were still closed but his ears picked up Hermione and her mother chatting. He also felt Hermione's hand in his, he gave it a slight squeeze.

"Harry?"

"Not so loud, Hermione, my head is thumping." Feeling the awkward way she moved toward him for a kiss saw Harry's eyes spring open, and look directly into a tearful pair of brown ones.

"I'm fine, Harry, at least I will be. My legs were crushed and I'll need to regrow the bones tonight."

He attempted to lift his hand and touch her face, only to find it wouldn't move.

Emma had moved around to the other side of Harry and leant down to kiss him on the forehead. "You have some bone growing to do yourself, Harry, just take it easy for now."

"Is everyone else okay? Henrica, Parvati?"

Hermione had rested her head gently on Harry's chest while Emma stroked her fingers through his hair. "You two are the worst injured, everyone else will be going home tonight. We're hoping both of you will make it out of here tomorrow."

Harry recognised the Hogwarts infirmary but had no recollection of coming here. Now that he knew everyone was okay, it was time to

get some more answers. "How did we get here and how much trouble are we in? I hope Dan's not too upset, a toddler could get the better of me at the moment."

Hermione gave Harry's hand that still had bones in it a comforting squeeze before answering. "The basilisk's skin was so resistant to magic, they couldn't levitate it off me. It took about thirty goblins with transfigured iron levers to move it enough for our father to slip me out from under it. I passed out at that point and woke up here."

Her mother then took over. "Nobody will be saying anything until you are both recovered and the whole family are there, how much trouble you're in will depend on what happened today. Everyone bar Smita and me are currently down in the chamber, along with a load of press too. They're getting a look at this creature and then the auror's memory is going to be played on a goblin viewer..."

This earned a loud and long groan from Harry, and an answer from his mate. "...I know, we're totally screwed!"

-oOoOo-

Dan almost passed out just seeing the shed skin, even this though didn't prepare him for seeing the real thing. He was able to draw some comfort after noticing neither Sirius or Ramrao seemed to be dealing with this any better than he was. Barchoke had to lead Augusta away and transfigure a chair for the game old witch.

Knowing their kids were actually all safe in the infirmary was the only thing currently holding Dan together, he certainly didn't envy Barchoke bursting in here with no idea what he would find. There had been so much blood spilled that the metallic taste was actually tainting the dank air, he now agreed one hundred percent with the wise goblin's assessment. That their kids had survived this was certainly a cause for celebration, Dan fully intended to have a few glasses of single malt later. He noticed Minerva McGonagall transfigure a chair for herself, right next to Augusta's as Amelia set up a table with a viewer on it. She was joined by the Minister of Magic, Ragnok, Barchoke and both Weasleys - it was show time.

Amelia called the assembled crowd forward. Just about every auror or goblin who wasn't required to guard Hogwarts at the moment had also invited themselves along to the chamber. Since the minister

had decided nothing would be hidden from the public regarding this situation, it was a case of the more the merrier.

"You have now all seen the basilisk for yourselves, and the all too obvious signs of the epic struggle that played out in this chamber. What we are going to do now is watch Auror Tonks memory of the entire event replayed on a goblin memory viewer. It will only show things from the perspective of the person whose memory is being displayed but has the distinct advantage of being able to be viewed by a large group. Please save any questions until the end, we will try and answer them if we can."

The memory started while Harry and Hermione were training, just before the alarm went off. They could all see the auror trying to do her job and protect the two students, Helena's arrival changed that. Watching as the school was evacuated and then almost stumbling upon the scene of the attack had every eye riveted to the viewer. Amelia was sorry to see Susan and Hannah lying there, drawing comfort from the knowledge Barchoke had already sent what supplies they had of the mandrake potion to St. Mungo's. She could also take pride that her aurors were lying at the front, and had gone down trying to protect the students.

Ramrao was in tears as Padma tried to rip the sink of the wall with her bare hands, there were gasps of awe at the magical power pouring off Harry's sword. When Hermione put forward her idea for blinding the basilisk, Dan felt Sirius grip his shoulder before whispering. "Those glasses saved Henrica's life, your daughter is in for one hell of a Christmas present!"

They all looked on as they forged a plan of action to deal with the basilisk, impressing the hell out of everyone who had seen the result of that plan currently lying dead on the chamber floor.

Both Dan and Sirius had to grab Ramrao as they watched Padma shake her sister and plead for her not to be dead, the poor man's legs practically gave out on him - and then Tom Riddle made an appearance. The four switching to goblin immediately drew a murmur from the crowd, that would certainly be a question that would be getting asked later.

With the appearance of the basilisk, and Henrica's heroics, it was now Sirius who needed a supportive arm to steady himself. After

shouting instructions to Tonks, the four made a lot of noise and even fired a few curses at the now blind creature to get the giant snake to follow them. From Tonks position, she only caught about half the battle amongst the pillars. It was more than enough to give everyone watching a flavour of what was actually happening.

As Padma and Neville led the creature through the columns, Harry or Hermione would appear and wound the beast. Tonks did have a perfect view of the final moments of the battle. They all saw Hermione slice into the basilisk's side, only for her retreat to be spoiled by the pool of blood her escape path led her into. Padma reacted at once, rushing to help Neville turn the beast away from their friend. The basilisk though wasn't for turning and then the golden blur that was Harry slammed into it, he was once more a blur as a blast then saw him shooting right across the chamber.

Tonks view shifted between Riddle crowing over Harry and what was happening at the basilisk. Padma was attempting to comfort Hermione while Neville lifted her sword and ran around to the other side of the Basilisk's head. He reemerged with a bloody basilisk fang in his hand and then shouted to Riddle.

When Neville claimed this was for their parents and slammed the fang into the diary, Augusta was on her feet - her victory cry matching Tom Riddle's scream for volume and intensity. Neville had just reached Harry when Barchoke came racing into the chamber. Hearing his son was unconscious, he issued orders to those goblins who were right behind him before making his way over to Hermione, the memory ended with a bloody Padma staggering as quickly as her tired legs would allow toward the auror.

The moment of silence that followed was soon broken by tumultuous cheering, applause and weapons being banged off shields.

Amelia finally got them quietened down enough where she could be heard. "This is the first time anyone has watched a memory of this event so I hope you will understand if we don't have answers to all your questions. We are in no way being evasive, it simply means we don't have all the answers ourselves - yet. We also have the family of those young people here in the chamber with us, please keep those questions respectful."

The first question was predictable and easily dealt with by Amelia. "Yes, that was Tom Riddle, who likes to call himself Lord Voldemort. As to the importance of the book, I would defer to Ambassador Barchoke's expertise on the matter."

The goblin's authoritative voice spread his knowledge around the chamber. "The book was a horcrux, one of the darkest and foulest pieces of magic known, and something we have been searching for the past decade to destroy. Part of Voldemort's soul was embedded into its very pages, controlling the young witch who had the misfortune to write in it. Voldemort has controlled those a lot more knowledgeable and powerful than Miss Patil, though I am delighted to say our healers have confirmed no trace of the soul fragment remains. Mr Longbottom very effectively killed that portion of the dark lord."

"Can you tell us where they learned to fight like that, and what language they were speaking during the battle?"

Again Amelia deferred to Barchoke. "My son arrived in Hogwarts as a warrior, and has since attained the rank of centurion. After witnessing the auror's memory, I think everyone here would agree my son earned that rank." This was greeted by cheers and sword banging from the goblins present.

"The four work hard at their extra defence tuition every Saturday and Sunday, they receive this tuition from Assistant Ambassador Weasley here, and have done so since the beginning of their first year. They now speak goblin so their opponents can't understand their communications, the advantage of this was ably demonstrated in this morning's battle. As young Neville Longbottom so succinctly put it, his friends have been determined to watch my son's back since the four met last September. As a father, I can't tell you how humble and yet proud that makes me."

The ministry contingent neatly sidestepped questions on awards and basilisk carcass ownership, saying those were discussions that would have to involve more people than those currently present in the chamber.

The one question that caused a stir was aimed at Tonks. "Could the auror please tell us what this mysterious plan B was?"

Tonks had been standing with her fellow aurors watching her memory replayed, Amelia nodded toward Tonks to answer the question.

She tried to look anywhere but in Mr Patil's direction as she answered. "I was closely monitoring Miss Patil's condition. Should she pass away, that would mean Tom had regained his body - and also be my signal to attack him with everything I had. Voldemort had no wand so this might be our only chance to kill him before he got his hands on one."

This led to a follow-up question. "Would you really have killed him?"

Tonks was unrepentant and hardened her stance. "For Voldemort to have regained his body, he would have had to murder Parvati Patil. Let's not forget the four students who were also fighting for their lives, Voldemort with a new body would have swung the balance of the battle against them. To answer your question, I would have blown his head clean off his shoulders - and gladly lived with the consequences."

It was actually Ragnok who broke the awkward silence that followed the auror's declaration of intent. "Auror Tonks, should you ever require alternative employment, Gringotts would be honoured to offer someone with your skills, courage and conviction a position."

Her time spent in Barchoke's company allowed Amelia to read the mischievous twinkle in the director's eyes, it also allowed her to feel secure that her answer would be accepted in the spirit it was offered. "Ambassador Barchoke, could you kindly ask your director to refrain from poaching one of my finest young aurors. Miss Tonks will not require alternative employment as long as I am director of the DMLE."

Ragnok acknowledged the gentle rebuke, accepting it in the friendly manner it was offered, he'd achieved his aim. The young auror who had the courage to do what was necessary now publicly had the protection of her director, let the press make of that what they will.

When the question was asked about how the diary came to be in a young student's hands, the minister himself stepped in at that point. "I have to say that matter is currently under investigation, a joint investigation involving both the ministry and our goblin friends from

Gringotts. We suspect that these set of circumstances didn't happen by accident and you can rest assured we will get to the bottom of this."

-oOoOo-

The Prophet led with the headline 'Heroes of Hogwarts' and had six small pictures of those heroes arranged above one of the now dead basilisk that commanded the entire width of the front page. The complete story was then laid out in great detail for the readers, there was no need to embellish what was a truly epic struggle against both Voldemort and a basilisk.

This would be the main talking point at every breakfast table in magical Britain. At the Malfoys, they simply bypassed talking and progressed straight to screaming at each other.

"You sent a horcrux into Hogwarts while our son was there - are you completely mad?"

"I didn't know it was a horcrux until you showed me that blasted book - you think I want our master returning when we have nothing to offer him? Dobby!"

The little elf appeared with his head bowed.

"I sent you to Hogwarts to retrieve this book and you failed me.."

"Dobby carried out master's orders exactly. Dobby searched Harry Potter's Patil friend's room, all her belongings and even under her pillow while she slept. Dobby did not talk to anyone, Dobby did not go anywhere else and Dobby was not seen."

Narcissa hit the roof at her husband's incompetence. "You couldn't even give the book to the right witch, yet you expect them not to catch you?"

"They're identical twins who had their backs to me on a packed train platform!"

"You should have had Dobby check both of them, or did it never occur to you that the great Lucius Malfoy could make a mistake? This is your scheme, your catastrophe and neither my son nor I will



be embroiled in your mess. You are on your own for this one, Lucius, and don't expect me to play the dutiful wife - I will not be visiting Azkaban for you or my sister."

Draco was watching this byplay but his mind was elsewhere. His father may have given the diary to the wrong Patil witch but Draco knew he had made a much bigger mistake than that. Granger had almost been killed by that basilisk and Crow would be out for revenge.

His parents generation may have had a saying that you never messed with a goblin, Draco's generation were currently refining that phrase. You never mess with a goblin, especially Harry Crow.

Lucius Malfoy had actually committed an even worse crime than that, he'd messed with Crow's girlfriend. Azkaban might be scary but Draco was more concerned his father would face Crow's blades before he could be sent to the island prison. He could only see one outcome from that battle, his father would be dead.

The beetle that was currently clinging to the curtain shared none of Draco's fears, Rita was far too busy thinking of ways to spend all the money this morning's revelations would now see coming her way.

-oOoOo-

Gilderoy bypassed the front page and delved deeper into the Prophet, finding what he was searching for on page sixteen. It was difficult to tell if he'd gotten his heroic pose in front of the basilisk exactly right, the picture wasn't overly large. They'd copied his quickly prepared speech exactly though, which was good - he hated being misquoted. He carefully cut out the picture, making sure to leave the article attached. An article in which the famous Gilderoy Lockhart pointed out exactly where the children had made their mistakes - and why they would be so much better off taking their defence lessons from him.

He conveniently ignored the scathing comments underneath the very same article that branded his proposed method of dealing with the basilisk as not only preposterous but suicidal. Gilderoy also paid no notice of the claims that, after the Hogwarts alarm sounded, he was first out the castle and, still in his baby blue silk pyjamas, had ran screaming all the way to Hogsmeade.

Gilderoy carefully stuck his latest addition into his scrapbook and began refining his headmaster's acceptance speech. After this incident, who else could they possibly choose?

A/N Thanks for reading

## Chapter 47

Padma arrived with her family into a back garden that was very familiar to the young witch, she fairly shot through the door in search of her friends. Neville was actually waiting on her and there was no awkwardness in his hug of greeting. It was a rather nervous Parvati though who entered the Grangers' home at a much more sedate pace, and with her mother and father close for support.

Neville spotted this at once and released Padma before opening his arms to her twin. With a sob, Parvati dived into them and held on as if her life depended upon it. Ever since hugging his gran in the Hogwarts infirmary saw Neville escaping the expected rollicking of his life, the relieved wizard's new mantra was to hug everyone. He thought he'd gotten it wrong here until noticing the other three Patils were smiling at him.

"I'm so sorry, Neville, for all the trouble I caused..."

"You didn't do anything, Parvati, it was all Tom. I'm sorry too that I never noticed what was really going on. I'm your housemate, your friend, and we had just spent a good part of the summer together. I was so wrapped up in my own world though that I ignored a friend that needed help. I really am sorry, Parvati."

Parvati may have controlled her sobbing but Neville's arms around her were proving too nice to end right away. "You came to rescue me, Neville, I couldn't ask for a better friend than that."

"That's what friends do, Harry and Hermione will tell you the same. Their legs still have them toddling about like baby's but they're waiting on you both in the lounge."

Padma took her twin and led her there, Ramrao wanted a quick word with Neville first. "Thanks for that, Neville, Parvati was really worried about meeting people again. That was a very mature attitude to take."

"Sir, to be perfectly honest, I never expected to come out of the chamber - that basilisk was bloody terrifying. Padma pulled me through, and gave me the courage to fight on. I think our time down there will change all of us, my gran certainly treats me different now."

Ramrao had his hand supportingly on Neville's shoulder. "I saw that beast dead and it terrified me, I'm still not sure how you four managed to pull it off. I also saw my daughter kiss you, and wanted to let you know I approve - assuming you remain a gentleman..."

"Sir, Padma is a scary witch in her own right - but have you met her best friends? Padma and I haven't had time to discuss anything about that day yet, when we do I can assure you I will be a proper gentleman."

"Ramrao, stop trying to scare the boy."

"Smita, this 'boy' helped bring down a gigantic basilisk and then stopped Voldemort, I hardly think he'll be scared of Padma's father."

The three shared a quiet laugh at that as Neville showed them where to go. Smita wasted no time in rushing over to the sofa to hug Harry and Hermione, drawing a wry chuckle from Emma. "I find myself doing that all the time too, I think I'm trying to convince myself that they are actually okay and still with us."

The Patil mother agreed. "I found myself repeatedly getting up and checking the twins room the last couple of nights, just to ensure they were safely sleeping in their beds. I am so glad I never went down into that chamber, just the picture in yesterday's Prophet scared the life out of me. I would probably never let the girls out of my sight again if I had actually seen the beast for real."

Sirius and Dan had been ferrying enough chairs for everyone into the lounge. Now that they were all seated, it was time to start the 'family' meeting.

"Augusta, Smita, Ramrao, you will hear things today that I must ask you not to speak of with anyone who isn't currently in this room." Barchoke's gaze then settled on Parvati. "I'm afraid that applies doubly so to you, Miss Patil."

She nodded her agreement at once. "I think what upset me the most was not knowing what was going on. Padma and I never had secrets from each other before, that played a big part in pushing us away from each other. As long as I can talk to Padma about anything I hear today, I'll be happy with that."

Smita was pleased at any move that would keep her twins close to each other. "Are we to assume that Padma and Neville already know these secrets?"

It was Harry who answered this time. "Hermione, Padma and Neville have stood beside me practically since we met. Their friendship means everything to me and keeping secrets is not a good basis for any friendship. I'm really sorry Padma, we should have realised what you keeping those same secrets from Parvati would do to your relationship with your twin sister. It's time to trust people and live with the consequences. Did you get confirmation, father?"

The goblin seemed to age as he answered his son. "Yes, and he was working alone."

"Then he is a dead man..."

"Harry, no. Let the ministry deal with it."

"Hermione, he attacked my family - he attacked you!" The rest of the 'family' didn't exist for the couple at the moment, they were staring into each other's eyes as they fought this battle of wills.

"Amelia will make sure he sees the inside of Azkaban, we could even ask he gets Sirius' old cell. Ask your godfather if that's a soft option."

"...but Hermione, he attacked..."

"...and you're not fit to duel anyone over the age of three at the moment. Let Amelia have that time to see justice done. If he's not in Azkaban by then, I'll even be your second."

Harry was getting lost in those brown eyes. "She can have a week, after that - he's mine!"

"Make it two, love. Give both you and Amelia time to get ready. Two weeks, for me, please?" When Hermione added a tender kiss to her plea, everyone there knew Harry was done for.

"Two weeks - not a day longer!"

This earned Harry another kiss and saw a weight leave Barchoke's shoulders. He knew his son would call Malfoy out, just as the goblin knew there was no way he could have talked Harry out of it. Hermione very wisely didn't even try that tact, instead she rather cleverly bought some time for Amelia to do her work - and allow Harry to recover properly.

The goblin was glad Hermione had extracted that promise before his son heard the next piece of news, even his mate would have struggled to contain Harry's anger after this.

"I should now really fill everyone in on exactly what's going on here. During the summer, we received a warning that a 'great danger' would be coming to Hogwarts. That this danger would involve Harry was all the information we had, absolutely nothing specific that we could approach yourselves, Amelia or Minerva with."

You would have to be a right fool not to see there was more going on here than they were being told, and Augusta was no fool. "Can I ask why Amelia and the girls aren't here today?"

Barchoke directed his answer at those who didn't yet know the full story. "There are things you will hear that we wouldn't necessarily want the Head of the DMLE to learn. That's in no way a negative reflection on the current holder of that post, rather us trying to offer some protection to Amelia. She will certainly hear that this was a direct attack against my son, and also that the wrong witch ended up with the horcrux..."

Padma caught on at once. "It was supposed to be me, wasn't it?"

This was confirmed by Barchoke. "An attack on Harry would work best if it was targeted at you, Neville or Hermione."

"Oh, Malfoy is so dead!"

This sharpened Augusta's attention. "Malfoy, Lucius Malfoy?"

Her indiscretion saw Padma's cheeks blush. "Oops! I wasn't supposed to say anything..."

"Okay, let's get everything out in the open. I am Harry Crow, current head of House Potter. My father arranged that so no one could

influence my decision on where my future lies. Funnily enough, the ministry solved my problem by awarding me an Order of Merlin, that automatically makes me an adult as far as the ministry are concerned - and allows me to call out Malfoy. His elf actually provided the warning, which is why we got no specific details. We only discovered it was Malfoy's elf when Draco's mother pulled him from Hogwarts - and we only suspected a basilisk was involved when Hermione found that information in the library on Friday night."

Her hand slipped into his, knowing what was coming next. "Hermione is not merely my girlfriend, we are blood bound mates - and will officially marry when both of us become of age to do so."

Parvati immediately looked to her twin for confirmation, Padma told her what she knew. "Truly bonded, with an all-over glow that turned golden - I wish I could have seen it!"

"Our father has a memory of our bonding, I'm sure he could be convinced to let you see it. We put the Malfoys under investigation - using the same method that brought down Dumbledore - and now have confirmation. Father, can we prove it to the ministry though?"

"We certainly have enough evidence to get him arrested and standing trial for this. Letting Amelia and the Minister know we're having to hold you back from calling Lucius out might just force them into action. Failing that, do you think Malfoy would accept the pit?"

"NO! Not again, that can't happen again..."

"Emma, there is not one person in this room who wants that. Just like they did in the chamber though, we have to prepare for every option. I will be putting all the pressure I can on the ministry to deal with this, and am confident that Malfoy will receive justice. I also think Harry has a better chance fighting Malfoy in the pit, rather than a formal wizards duel. Lucius will be able to use whatever curses he wants in the pit, without any repercussions, he'll go for a big play. While Lucius is grandstanding, Harry will be on him."

It was Smita who asked the obvious question. "Eh, what's this pit, and why does Emma look as if she's going to pass out?"

With difficulty, Harry moved over to Emma. "This is just contingency plans, please don't worry about it..."

"Do you have to do this, Harry? I never want to even think about you going into that thing again."

"Same reason as last time, Emma, he attacked Hermione. If I don't respond, someone else may think it's worth another try. There are families who would literally kill to get their daughters next to the Potter name and fortune, until I marry Hermione I need to show what happens to anyone daring to make that attempt."

It was left to Hermione to answer Smita's original question. "The pit is the goblin way of deciding justice. Two go in, only one comes out alive. A goblin made an attempt to kill me at the end of the summer, that is why we blood bonded. Harry then fought in the pit to ensure it would never happen again. He put their champion down in seconds..."

Padma and Parvati moved either side of Hermione to offer comfort, Emma didn't appear to be letting Harry go anytime soon.

Barchoke summed the situation up for everyone. "The blood bond makes Hermione my daughter too, I will do everything in my power to keep both of them safe. Malfoy needs to pay for this atrocity though, one way or another he will."

The Potter elves then decided refreshments were needed, while Betsy popped in with a hankie for Hermione - and a warning not to overtire herself.

As Harry shakily made his way back to Hermione, Dan tried to get everyone back on track. "Are there any more questions, or can we move on to the real reason behind this get-together today?"

Ramrao spoke for the rest of them. "If we think of anything later, Padma or Neville will probably know the answer."

Happy with that, Dan continued. "We watched Auror Tonks memory right from just before the alarm sounded. While my first instincts were for you to get out that castle as quickly as possible, you took minimal risks to collect information that could prove vital in solving this problem. Discovering Parvati's predicament clearly changed all the rules."



Parvati was now sitting between Padma and Neville, and was very grateful for the support they offered.

"Even then, you sent for help immediately and did nothing more than attempt to open the passage. On achieving that difficult feat, you still hung back until formulating a plan. I tried to put myself in your position and discovered I would have made all the same choices. Every member of the team that went into the chamber played an absolutely vital role in ensuring we are all sitting here today to talk about this. Had you went down there with even one person less, the outcome could have been oh so different."

The four were looking at Dan as if waiting for the hammer to drop, it wasn't going to happen. "Had you lot rushed in there all gung-ho, looking for trouble, we would be having a very different conversation right now. Instead, you never lost sight of the fact it was a rescue mission, and only fought when you were left with no other choice. I guess what I'm trying to say is that I'm so proud of all of you. The Prophet got it right, you are heroes in the truest sense of the word - you risked your lives to save someone else's."

The Patil's, Barchoke, Sirius and Augusta heartily endorsed that viewpoint, leaving some very relieved people thinking they got off lightly.

It was now Hermione's turn to toddle across the room as she hugged her father.

"Okay, enough of this mushy stuff. That basilisk obviously affected the beautiful Professor Hobson more than the healers thought, she actually agreed to marry me!" Sirius punctuated this announcement with a kiss for a smiling Henrica

This news was greeted with cheers all round. Sirius of course had more to say. "There will be an engagement party in Grimmauld on Boxing Day but I would like to invite our extended family to spend the Christmas holidays with us. I want to turn the entire holiday season into a celebration, a celebration of our new family - and no, Henrica is not pregnant!" The way the couple looked at one another at that remark meant Sirius didn't need to say 'yet', they all got the message.

Emma had found that she'd been close to tears ever since Saturday, the ones now forming though were of joy - and partly relief. Since he was released from Azkaban, they had spent a lot of time with Sirius. Even when Harry and Hermione were in Hogwarts, he would visit at least once a week to tell them how their kids were doing. Henrica was also liked by everyone in the company, and thought a wonderful match for Sirius, so this news was indeed joyous.

Her relief was due to their Christmas problem being so neatly solved. Emma didn't really care where they spent Christmas, just as long as they were all together. With Dan working to control his natural instinct and springing to Hermione's defence without thinking, they were slowly but surely rebuilding relationships that would eventually be stronger than they were before.

Dan had sat with a glass of whiskey in his hand, and tears rolling down his cheeks, as he recounted to her the story of what their kids had faced. Emma had let him get it out of his system and then taken Dan to bed, the glass of whiskey left still untouched on the table. She was so proud of her husband for the way he handled the situation today, and now they could look forward to spending Christmas as a family.

This jolted Emma out of her thoughts as a potential problem hit. "Sirius, Luna Lovegood has been invited to spend Christmas with us..."

"...and she's invited to Grimmauld too. Where is she, I thought her father was still on his research trip?"

His wife-to-be had the answer to that. "Padma made sure Luna was with Penny, before we went looking for these two. Penny swore not to let Luna out of her sight, and was even going to take Luna home with her."

"They're both coming here tomorrow, Penny is bringing her by something called the knight bus, and then Luna will be staying until we go back to Hogwarts." Hermione then added a little more information about their quirky friend. "She also knows about our bond, apparently she can see it."

-oOoOo-

Cornelius was wishing he couldn't see this as Lucius Malfoy condemned himself with his own words. "We can't show that memory in the Wizengamot chamber, they would never accept evidence collected like that. He clearly didn't know someone else was watching, and it was a discussion with his wife - in his own home. If we started admitting evidence like that into a trial, half the Wizengamot would probably end up being interviewed by your department."

Having known these facts beforehand, Amelia wasn't perturbed in the slightest. "Then we have some serious problems, Cornelius. Barchoke has informed me that only Harry's injuries are currently stopping his son calling the senior Malfoy out, we are talking a duel to the death here."

This fairly ruined the Minister's day, his public approval rating had never been higher too. Anything happening to the Boy-who-lived would soon put a serious dent in those ratings. "Harry wouldn't be doing the actual fighting though, would he?"

"His status as a centurion in his own world sees him regarded as an adult, being an Order of Merlin, First Class, recipient provides the same function in ours. He would fight Lucius Malfoy to the death. Harry was clearly the target, and his friends suffered through it. Luna Lovegood, my Susan, Hannah Abbot, Parvati Patil - and then the three of his friends that accompanied him down to the chamber for the rescue mission. His girlfriend, Miss Granger, is still recovering from the injuries she sustained."

This drew an audible groan from the minister. "We should be discussing how we can reward these heroes, not trying to stop them fighting duels to the death. What can we do about this, Amelia?"

"I think we have more than enough information to arrest Malfoy, a search of his manor to ensure he has nothing else like this would also appear prudent. He obviously did it, and should then be forced to say so under truth serum. How far we want to open the can of worms really has to be decided by you." In the past, this would be the point at which Cornelius would fold - protecting his friends and his own self-interest. It was time to see if this new version really had grown a spine.

The minister didn't disappoint. "Acting on reliable information the ministry has received, an arrest warrant should be issued against Lucius Malfoy. Since this relates to a deadly artefact that was in his possession, a thorough search of his premises should also take place to ensure there are no more threats lurking in the background. He should be questioned under truth serum regarding this attack, and any other current or planned future attacks he has knowledge of. Will that do?"

Amelia could see Cornelius practically begging her with his eyes to accept this compromise. Since it was more than Amelia expected, and would see Malfoy take up residence in Azkaban, she decided to cut the minister a break. Amelia also had something up her sleeve she now wouldn't need to use as leverage, she told Cornelius anyway. "That would be acceptable. It will also work for the press, since Miss Skeeter is all set to break the story. I'm looking forward to being ahead of the game for once. I'll get a team together and hit Malfoy Manor today."

The minister was certainly paler when Amelia left his office than he was when she entered. Cornelius had made the right choices though, now it was her turn. She could have lost the last member of her family over this, Malfoy was going down - hard.

-oOoOo-

Neville was finding his conversation with his grandmother extremely hard. "Gran, do we really need to talk about a betrothal? I really like Padma but we have kissed once, that hardly means we want to spend the rest of our lives together."

"I know, Neville, but you have to understand that these extraordinary escapades at Hogwarts from both of you are going to attract a lot of attention. Even your mother recognised Padma is a beautiful witch. Now that Padma's also recognised as a hero of Hogwarts, Ramrao and Smita expect to be inundated with offers for their daughter. There will also be a lot of offers heading in your direction too. What we're trying to do here is see both of you happy, rather than arranging a betrothal that you don't really want."

This drew a groan from Neville, his pact with Padma was supposed to shield them from betrothal offers - but that was before the chamber. "Can't I just wait for a few years and see what happens?"

"Neville, you know that's not possible. I was betrothed at your age, so were your mother and father - the Longbottoms have done this for centuries. I know two of your friends are different but you and Padma have always known what's expected of you. If you're not interested in each other, we have to know now so Padma's parents can find the best possible match for their daughter. They really need to take advantage of all this interest."

Mentioning his other two friends sparked something in Neville. "As I said, I really like Padma but neither of us know if we're suitable for a betrothal. There is a way we can find out though..."

This took Augusta back. "Neville, surely you don't mean..."

"Yes, we perform the blood bond ritual. That will tell us if we're a suitable match, then we could happily be betrothed. The blood bond wouldn't finalise until we were married, just like Harry and Hermione."

His grandmother was well aware of what act was needed to finalise a blood bond, she spared Neville's blushes and let him off with the marriage comment. "What would you do if the blood bond indicated you weren't suitable?"

"Hug Padma and wish her luck in finding someone else, I would also promise we would always be friends. She really is a great friend, gran, I would hate to see her stuck with me. This way, we would both know if a betrothal would work."

It was hard for Augusta to curtail her exasperation and a little slipped out. "Neville Longbottom, you are one of the most eligible young wizards in Britain - and that was before the Chamber of Secrets. You are certainly not someone a witch would consider being stuck with - like some kind of booby prize! Both Smita and Ramrao think Padma's sweet on you, and I know you really like her - that puts you both in the same position your mum and dad were."

This made him happier about the situation but Neville had made his mind up. "I still want to try the blood bond ceremony. Like Harry, I've spent my life listening to stories of how much my parents loved each other - I want the same. This way, Padma and I can know exactly how suitable we would be for each other."

Augusta really only had one more question for her grandson. "...and what do you hope the result of the ritual will be?"

This time, Neville couldn't contain his blush - he answered as honestly as he could. "I hope it shows we have a strong bond, and that leads us to a betrothal."

A warm smile spread across Augusta's face. She recognised her grandson's innate shyness, and also the confidence he would gain from a positive reaction to the ritual. He needed proof that he and Padma would be a good match, and his other two friends had provided such a good example of what a couple should be. "Blood bond rituals were originally carried out to see if couples were suitable to wed, I've never heard of one being used as part of a pre-betrothal agreement. Any other family might take this as an insult to their daughter but I think I'll be able to explain the situation to Smita and Ramrao - that we all only want the best for Padma. It will need to be kept secret though, whatever the outcome."

Neville understood his gran meant secret from everyone except family, he was fine with that.

-oOoOo-

The Granger house once more woke to the whack, whack of practice swords being used in the back garden. Raising his head from the pillow to glance at the window drew a groan from Dan, his groan was directed at the rain he saw running down the glass. "Those two are still recovering, I hardly think being out in this weather will be helping."

"You could see their frustration yesterday because their injuries were physically curtailing them, they're obviously not fit to go for their run yet but this will let them get some normality back."

He couldn't help but tease his wife. "Emma, practicing with wooden swords in the pissing rain, mere days after being seriously injured, is anything but normal."

"It's normal for them. In our world, those two would have been looking at multiple surgical procedures, weeks of lying in a hospital bed and then months of physiotherapy. They would have been lucky

if they were able to practice fencing by this time next year. Those swords saved their lives, let them practice as often as they want..."

"You're still worried about Harry having to fight this Malfoy..."

"Worried doesn't even start to describe it - I'm bloody terrified! He may be a centurion but I just see my boy, having to fight someone to the death - how the hell am I supposed to feel?"

"I honestly don't think it will come to that, Barchoke was confident the ministry would take action. Remember, this thing also harmed Susan, we know how protective Amelia is of her niece. I was also watching Sirius as this was being discussed, I think he would take action before Harry could. We have an extended family now, with Harry right in the centre of it. That family won't stand back and let anything happen to him."

Emma snuggled into her husband, silently praying he was right - and the thwack thwack was merely their children practicing their sport/hobby.

-oOoOo-

The occupants of Malfoy Manor received a much ruder awakening, Amelia led her team to arrest Lucius - and tear the place apart in their search for other dark objects. She had brought Alastor Moody along for this very purpose, that artificial eye of his would certainly come in handy when looking for hidden rooms or compartments.

Lucius' heart sank as he spotted his visitors, Bones must have brought about twenty aurors with her. "What is the meaning of this..."

Amelia was in no mood to take any shit from Malfoy today. "Lucius Malfoy, I have a warrant here for your arrest. Evidence has been presented that implicates you as instigating the attacks at Hogwarts. You will have your day in front of the Wizengamot as they ascertain your guilt or innocence. We also have a search warrant that includes every part of Malfoy Manor, the ministry has no intention of allowing any more horcruxes to make their way into the general population."

This almost had Lucius reaching for his wand, the gleam of anticipation in Moody's good eye soon changed his mind. The

chances of the old auror hitting him with a stunner were negligible, Moody liked to put his targets down harder than that.

While slightly disappointed that Malfoy didn't try something really stupid, Amelia was suddenly thinking she might not need Moody after all. A rather ragged elf had silently appeared behind the Malfoys and was indicating to the floor at her feet. When Barchoke had supplied her with that memory, the goblin had also told her why they had focused their attention on the Malfoys. It was clear this elf wanted Lucius to be caught and was again providing all the help his bond would allow.

"Alastor, could you scan this room for hidden compartments or trapdoors?"

Mad-eye had of course spotted the elf and was already concentrating on the floor. "There is some kind of ward on the floor, and rather heavy notice-me-not charms. I think our friend from the unspeakables should start right here.

By the time a cowed Lucius was in the magic inhibiting cuffs, the unspeakable had the trapdoor open - and Dobby was ready to point them in the direction of their next find. There was enough dark objects in that room alone to ensure Lucius would be residing in Azkaban for a very long time.

Draco stood beside his mother, helplessly watching as his smart and oh so powerful father was led out of their home in chains. The chances of him returning to that same home were nil, the family didn't even have enough gold to waste on hiring a lawyer to defend him. Thinking of family saw the realisation hit that he was now effectively head of the Malfoys, it was time to make sure the family survived.

"Mother, I think you need to contact Lord Black over this matter."

"That won't help, Draco, your father and Sirius have hated each other since they were your age."

"I'm not asking for him to help father, we are going to need help to avoid being dragged under with father. Lord Black is our access to the only person who can help us here. A word from Crow could be



the difference between us still living at the manor or begging in the streets."

"I don't think that will do any good either. Sirius has no reason to be merciful, he has us exactly where he wants us."

"We're exactly where father put us, mother. I'm hoping he'll talk to Crow about it..."

"You're pinning your hopes on mercy from a goblin? I thought we taught you better than that..."

Draco gestured to their home being torn apart around them. "...and see where those lessons have led. Things changed the moment Crow walked into Hogwarts, father couldn't accept that and was led out of here in chains. Dumbledore couldn't accept it and has been chased out of Hogwarts. Crow showed me mercy before when he didn't need to, this time we are actually innocent. The right word from him can protect us from this - have you got any better ideas?"

That stopped Narcissa dead in her tracks, she actually had no idea what to do next. All their friends would sit back and wait to see what happened, too fearful of getting dragged into this mess to offer any semblance of support. They were on their own, and probably wouldn't survive the public backlash without some kind of protection. "Do you really think Crow would help?"

"He hates Lockhart, the man is a complete idiot, yet Crow cancelled the tarantallegra spell Slughorn had him under - before taking Sluggy apart and dangling him from the ceiling. His attitude is that of a pure light wizard but, when he chooses to act, his methods are at best grey. With Granger in danger, he would have jumped in that basilisk's mouth and slashed away with those blades of his to save her. Father's biggest mistake was to put her in danger, I half expected Crow to turn up here and personally hack him to bits. Anyone stupid enough to attack her will be shown no mercy, luckily we weren't involved with any of it. Crow really is our only chance..."

She couldn't argue with anything her son just said, those blades had just taken down the biggest basilisk ever recorded - how could you argue with that? "I'll send an owl to Sirius and see if he answers..."

"What about your sister? You might try writing to her too..."

"Draco, I haven't spoken to Andromeda in nearly twenty years!"

"The situation we are in at the moment, we can't afford not to take even the slimmest of chances. I've had to be civil to Crow for over a year now, not once has he rubbed my nose in it. Things are changing, mother, we need to change too. What alternative do we have?"

Narcissa couldn't see any alternatives, knowing the Wizengamot had the power to levy heavy fines against Lucius too. These would be taken straight out their vaults, leaving who knows what for Draco to inherit when he came of age. If they took too much, the Parkinsons would cancel the betrothal between Pansy and Draco, they may be forced to do so anyway - to distance themselves from Lucius' disaster.

It was beginning to dawn on Narcissa that, if she wanted Draco to have any kind of life, she was going to have to get her nose out of the air and do some grovelling. To protect her son's future, Narcissa would do whatever it took.

-oOoOo-

Emma had enjoyed her morning, she was taking a few days off work until Hermione and Harry had fully recovered. That, and she just didn't want to let them out of her sight. After Luna and Penny had arrived, and made sure Hermione and Harry were getting better, Emma had offered to take them into Crawley. When the alarm sounded at Hogwarts, there was no time to grab trunks as the evacuation took place. Luna was currently wearing some of Penny's resized clothes since her trunk was still in her dorm.

Just being able to do some normal things, clothes shopping and pizza for lunch, was exactly what Emma needed. Anything really to distract her mind from the thought of Harry fighting a duel to the death. Knowing there were charms on the magical bus that wouldn't even allow her to see it, Emma entered the house as the three friends said goodbye to Penny - and was surprised to find Sirius and Henrica waiting there. By the smile Sirius was wearing, it was going to be a pleasant surprise.

Knowing how worried Emma was, Sirius got straight to the point. "Lucius Malfoy was arrested this morning. Amelia arrived with a team of aurors and also tore Malfoy Manor apart - even his own wife expects him to be changing his address to Azkaban."

Emma managed to make it to a chair before she broke down and started crying, these though were tears of relief. Hermione and Harry were alarmed when they first spotted her sitting crying, that was until Sirius told them the reason behind her tears. He also told the pair he needed to speak with them - this would not be a straightforward conversation.

-oOoOo-

This was the first time Narcissa had entered Gringotts in almost a year, she had no reason to go there until now. Sirius had responded to her plea, and set their meeting here. Once the news broke, she probably wouldn't be able to walk down Diagon Alley, and certainly not stroll into Gringotts bank. She was led through a warren of tunnels until Narcissa was directed into what she considered a very strange room to hold a meeting, there weren't even any chairs, then she spotted Sirius standing beside an observation wall.

"I like to come here and spend some time just watching Alice and Frank recover, I always seem to pick up on some little sign of improvement that wasn't there the last time I visited. I've come to think of the Longbottoms as a metaphor for our society, we thought nothing could be done but, day by day, they are slowly proving us all wrong."

She watched in astonishment as Alice carefully brushed what hair her husband had left. And then lovingly kissed him on the cheek. "How is this possible? They've spent years in St Mungo's..."

"It's possible because of who Alice Longbottom is godmother to, the very same person who is my godson too - the same person who your husband intended to see dead."

She had no answer for that, and didn't think Sirius was looking for one - he hadn't even looked in her direction yet.

"My godson has a good heart, but that should never be taken as a sign of weakness. Barchoke has done a wonderful job of raising my

godson, the one area he was unable to teach is the workings of pureblood houses and politics - that is where I come in. Harry knows Draco is innocent, and also that he has been keeping his head down since their confrontation in the great hall. Harry feels a child shouldn't be persecuted for the sins of the father."

She let out a long and audible sigh of relief but that proved a mistake, Sirius now turned to face her - or should that be Lord Black.

"Just to be clear here, Malfoy, I don't agree with my godson on this. You may not have known the specifics of what that husband of yours was up to but you knew enough to get your own son out of danger - leaving everyone else behind to fucking die! Was your husband so precious to you that you were prepared to stand back and let him unleash mass murder onto children? Then again, his halfblood master met his end trying the same - to murder a baby. I'll bet your pureblood friends will love you when this gets out, making sure the Malfoy heir was safe while their children were left to the tender mercies of a basilisk."

Gone were the funny quips and jokes, Narcissa was faced with a furious Lord Black - a quite terrifying sight. "Let me make something plain to you, should Draco bide his time until his inheritance and then act, plot or conspire against my godson's health - I will make it my business to destroy the very name of Malfoy, and all those who bear it. Amelia actually did your husband a favour, either Harry or I would have killed him otherwise - and there would have been no saving of Draco from the consequences that."

Draco had already told her Crow would come for Lucius, adding Sirius to that too would have ensured she wore widow's weeds before long. Narcissa had nothing to say because she had nothing to offer, both she and Draco were completely at Sirius' mercy.

"Harry will release a statement, condemning your husband's actions but sparing Draco from any blame. For that, we want something in return..."

This was how Dobby came to find himself inside Gringotts, and being given clothes by his mistress.

A/N Thanks for reading - and hope to see you back here next week.

## Chapter 48

Rita held today's Prophet in her hand and couldn't help but smile. She was beginning to appreciate how the goblins operated, this certainly felt like a revenge worthy of that race. Although the Prophet had literally begged her to return, Rita had politely refused - and then wrung what would have been six months worth of her old salary out of them for the stories she had in today's paper.

With no editor breathing down her neck and no deadline to meet, her byline of Rita Skeeter, Independent Investigative Reporter sure tasted like sweet revenge to her - all the gold in her bank account certainly helped to sweeten that feeling too!

The Prophet had of course led with her story on Lucius Malfoy or, as the headline screamed - The Real Beast of Hogwarts. Malfoy was clearly the out and out villain of the piece, with the poor, innocent Patil witch simply unable to resist the dark and powerful compulsion charms on the horcrux. The article posed a simple question - what twelve year old could possibly resist the subtle manipulations of a dark lord?

That her twin sister and her friends had not only discovered, but then broken into the fabled Chamber of Secrets, slain the gigantic basilisk that had been attacking the school, stopped Tom Riddle from being reborn and then rescued Parvati too meant there would not be one shred of blame heading in the direction of the Patil family - quite the opposite.

That Voldemort had come within a whisker of being reborn was the really shocking part of the entire sorry tale, and ensured Malfoy would be joining his fellow death eaters in Azkaban.

The ministry also came out of this looking good. They already had Malfoy in a ministry cell by the time the story broke and had also ransacked his manor to ensure there were no more horcruxes lying in wait. That aurors had been in front of the students they were protecting and one had fought alongside the students down in the chamber left the population with the impression that their ministry actually knew what they were doing - a most unusual occurrence.

Hogwarts also had effective measures in place to deal with the emergency, the castle's evacuation was swift and efficient. Again, a

Hogwarts professor had fought alongside the students, almost losing her life in the process.

All in all, Rita was pleased with her articles and really pleased with the direction her life was taking. Being sacked by the Prophet and then getting hired by the goblins was proving to be the best thing that had ever happened to her.

-oOoOo-

Minerva was also amazed at the accuracy of the reporting, especially the article on the emergency meeting of the Hogwarts school board. With Albus' non-arrival, the current information Amelia Bones had available pointed to him leaving Britain all together, he was quickly dismissed as headmaster in his absence. Minerva had then refused the offered headmistress position, citing that she was in the process of introducing an entirely new method of transfiguration and would like to concentrate her efforts on that for the foreseeable future.

Augusta had invited Amelia and Barchoke to attend the meeting, it was the goblin though who asked the all important question. "Excuse me, exactly what did Headmaster Dumbledore do inside Hogwarts? All my dealings are with Professor McGonagall, which is why I asked that question. I know he didn't teach and that his deputy handled all the finances, what was his contribution to running the school?"

All eyes then shifted to Minerva, recognising that she would be best able to handle this question. She was rather uncomfortable with where the question could lead but still answered truthfully. "Albus left the day to day running of the school to me, he was more interested in setting Hogwarts policy, dealing with the paperwork involved - and of course hiring new staff."

This was greeted with silence before Amelia offered a suggestion. "Why not let Minerva continue with what she had been doing and just appoint someone to generally oversee Hogwarts. There exists some old legislation where the ministry can appoint someone into that very position, they would be known as the High Inquisitor of Hogwarts. They would also have the power to remove staff they felt weren't up to Hogwarts standard, a certain defence professor immediately springs to mind."

Her idea wasn't exactly greeted enthusiastically, so Amelia set out to solve their obvious problem with this. "I wasn't suggesting the ministry actually appoint someone, rather use the existing legislation to ratify whoever the school board chose to fill the role."

That was certainly a lot more palatable to the board and Augusta Longbottom was selected for the part-time position within the hour. Barchoke then explained the reason behind why he was here.

"Between us, Augusta and I represent three of the students who fought the basilisk, we also have Ramrao Patil's permission to make this offer. They propose to split the profits from the basilisk carcass into three pots. The first would pay for the upgrade of the Hogwarts wards, wards that won't even allow a marked death eater to enter the castle - far less something as dark as a horcrux. The remaining gold would then be split evenly between the final two pots, one to be shared amongst the rescuers and the other reserved for those who were injured by this situation."

Since they were basically getting the best wards gold could buy for free, the school board unanimously accepted this generous offer at once. Barchoke did explain that Gringotts would be erecting these ward at cost, the goblin nation had no intention of making profit from protecting schoolchildren. What he didn't say was that this would be a massive advert and profitable endorsement for their new wards, and that they expected to make a fair bit of gold from protecting homes of the wealthy. To a wizard with enough gold, wards that wouldn't allow death eaters even access to your property were certainly worth paying for.

It proved to be a very productive meeting, with everyone feeling as if they had gained something positive by the end of the night. Minerva was delighted that she would now be allowed to continue teaching the different form of transfiguration, and also have someone inside Hogwarts that might listen to her when she complained. With Augusta Longbottom in charge of hiring and firing, she didn't see Lockhart lasting much past Christmas. The only reason he might last that long was they would need to find a replacement first.

-oOoOo-

Edmund Parkinson focused more on the short interview Crow had given Rita. He'd heard from Pansy that Crow could easily lord it over Hogwarts but made no attempt to do so - and apparently had no interest in doing so either. The impression given here was of a wizard who had no interest in honours, or any intention of playing a hero over this affair. He stated quite plainly they had gone down there to rescue their friend - nothing more.

Crow's comment that he didn't want to see his friend being blamed for this incident, or anyone else other than the person who gave Parvati the horcrux resonated with Edmund. They had pulled their daughter out of Hogwarts on a mere suspicion, here was Crow publicly exonerating them - and others - of any blame. Pansy had begged him not to end her betrothal to Draco, citing this would indicate they blamed him and his mother for what happened at Hogwarts - something that could destroy the Malfoys.

The smart move would be to end that betrothal now, and offer Pansy to the Longbottom lad. This was something Edmund might still do - depending on the outcome of Lucius' trial. That Lucius was bound for Azkaban seemed beyond doubt, what would happen to the Malfoy money was not. A seventeen year old Draco would still inherit and, with Lucius out the picture, Edmund was sure he could influence his daughter's then wealthy future husband.

Draco would have a reprieve, at least until his father's trial. If the ministry took over half of the Malfoy money, that would be the end of Pansy's betrothal - no matter how many tears his daughter cried.

-oOoOo-

Dolores was attempting to be pragmatic about the situation - and failing miserably. Inside the witch was seething at the injustice of this, even though she understood it was nothing more than a case of very bad timing. The summer after next, she had secured the Quidditch World Cup to be held in England. Dolores had worked her arse off fighting to get the tournament to Britain, only to find the news buried deep inside the Prophet. The newspaper was still being dominated by the basilisk - and Harry Crow. Seeing him once more cast as the hero really made her blood boil, and that was before he stole her deserved front page.

-oOoOo-



It was now the following day before Albus could get his hands on a copy of the Prophet, he still thought it was worth the effort though. Now that he'd left Britain, it was vital that he kept himself up to date with just what was happening back home.

The most striking thing for him was just who had ended Tom Riddle, Albus had to read it three times to ensure he hadn't made a mistake - it actually said Neville Longbottom. This saw Albus questioning just which of the boys was the child of the prophecy, could he actually have gotten it wrong?

This would need careful consideration but he had time, neither of the boys would be going anywhere for the next five years or so. Plenty of time for Albus Dumbledore to make his triumphant return to Hogwarts, and once more engage in the battle for influence over the prophesied one. That there were again two contenders for the position meant he would need to keep a careful eye on what was happening back home - otherwise known as getting the Prophet delivered a day later than those living in Britain.

-oOoOo-

The group of friends were spending time together in Crawley that Saturday afternoon for two reasons. One was simply that they enjoyed each other's company and two was to help Parvati recover from her ordeal. Being in the company of Luna, Susan and Hannah, all of whom were petrified yet bore her no ill-will, would certainly help Parvati with facing having to climb back on board the Hogwarts express on Wednesday. Knowing her friends would be there for her too would also help, with even Lavender being invited to spend the day with the group.

Hermione was holding Harry's hand as they led their friends around the town centre, her mind though kept wandering back to last night - and the events at Longbottom Manor.

-o- last night -o-

Barchoke didn't need much of an excuse to show the memory of his son and daughter's bonding, and the family had already heard Harry had to fight in the pit. Luna was clutching Harry and Hermione as the fight unfolded, sensing something bad was about to happen. Both

Patil twins screamed as the goblin blade bit into Hermione, only for her armour to deflect it away.

"Still hurt like a bitch though! I had a bruise right down me."

No one was surprised at Hermione's revelation, and neither were they shocked at Harry's response to the attack on his girlfriend - that goblin was just fortunate Harry dropped his blade. The girls screams had soon turned to sighs as the bond formed, with Padma, Parvati and Luna all staring at the couple in awe.

It was Neville though who reacted first. "Harry, can I borrow your sword for our bonding ceremony? I was going to use the potions knife you gave me but I want all the help magic can give me." After insisting on the bond, Neville was now dreading a negative result - as was Padma.

Hermione had worn her sword specifically in the hope Padma might ask for it, she handed it over to her friend as Neville had the sword of Gryffindor in his grasp. The rest of the world no longer existed for the pair as, with a nod, Padma indicated she was ready.

They cut their hands in unison, Neville going deeper than he intended due to the exceedingly sharp blade. That was the least of his troubles though, the next few minutes could decide the course of his life.

They clasped their bleeding hands together as Neville offered the incantation.

"You are mine, and I am yours."

Padma's eyes positively sparkled as she provided the necessary response.

"You are mine, and I am yours."

Not one person in the room breathed as they studied the couple's joined hands, those collective breathes were released as a silver glow began to escape from their linked fingers. As that glow passed their wrists and began travelling up their arms, an air of euphoria amongst the watchers escalated directly in relationship to the expanding glow. As it reached their shoulders, Ramrao let out a loud

yell of celebration - his wife and Parvati had already been in floods of tears from the instant the silver glow first made an appearance. It crept into their chests, stopping when it reached their hearts before slowly fading away.

Neville's gaze had never left Padma's eyes, "Will that do you, Miss Patil?"

"Mr Longbottom, I was yours the instant our hands healed." She proceeded to prove it by grabbing him for their second kiss, and this time Neville just might have ended up sock-less.

With the exception of Augusta, all the females present then mobbed the couple. The Longbottom matriarch had a wide smile on her face though as she approached Ramrao. "I believe we have some business to discuss, it will give me great pleasure to invite your daughter to join our family."

"As Padma's father, I can honestly say I couldn't think of a wizard better suited to one day marry my daughter than your grandson. I will be delighted to sign the documents that will formalise what we witnessed here today."

Dan found himself standing next to Barchoke, a hint of sadness creeping into what was a happy occasion. "This is what it should have been like for our children, and I ruined that..."

He didn't get to say any more as Hermione had heard, and quickly rounded on him. "Dad, everyone today knew exactly why we were here. You had just watched some memories and then were told I was married, how else could you react? You now understand our situation and are happy for us, I can't ask for anything better than that."

Barchoke was chuckling as Hermione kissed her father on the cheek. "Dan, I have to confess I've rarely known our daughter to be wrong about anything. She is of course right about this."

"If it makes you feel any better, Dan, we all expected to get a right roasting for the chamber. Let's now call it even and move on."

Looking at the boy he was quickly coming to consider as his son, Dan nodded his acceptance of that and held his hand out to shake. "Deal!"

As they clasped hands, Dan had one more question. "There is something I wanted to ask though, what is your honest appraisal of what happened down there." Neville and Padma were returning their borrowed swords which gave the four a minute to think of an answer for Dan.

"I didn't want to take Hermione down there but she was right, we needed her. We also had no plan to deal with Tom Riddle, Neville saved all our arses over that. Henrica was just amazing, otherwise we would have been in really bad trouble. I think we would all agree that we carried an amazing amount of luck, the only time it turned against us being Hermione slipping."

Hermione agreed with every word of that. "I certainly didn't feel heroic, lying on a wet and bloody floor with a giant snake's head in my lap. Padma and I were too worried about Parvati and Harry to feel much of anything. Our training saved our lives, that same training has also taught us just how lucky we were that day."

Dan then embraced the happy new couple. "Congratulations you two, I didn't mean to lower the tone of the celebrations."

Neville wore a smile that nothing was going to shift, just like nothing was going to shift Padma from his side. "That's fine, Dan. Without going down into that chamber, Padma might never have kissed me - and I certainly wouldn't have had the courage to ask her to blood bond."

His betrothed now playfully slapped his arm. "Listen Longbottom, you were always going to get kissed. That ruddy great snake just moved the timetable up a bit!"

The celebration was back on track when Augusta and Ramrao returned, the paperwork all dealt with. She handed a small box to her grandson and Neville's smile got even wider.

He opened the box and placed the Longbottom betrothal ring on Padma's finger, before offering her the box to do the same for him. There was no need for words, their blood bond was far stronger than

any betrothal agreement - something the rings recognised as a spark of magic passed between them.

An impromptu party broke out after that, no one had wanted to plan one beforehand in case they jinxed the outcome of the blood bond ceremony.

It was during this time that Sirius approached Dan and Emma. "I have a little problem you two might be able to help me with. Setting Dobby free has created an unforeseen problem, the little guy apparently likes being free."

This left Dan shaking his head. "Why does everything in your world have to be so bloody complicated? How could someone wanting to remain free be a problem?"

"House Elves love to work, it's when they're at their happiest..."

This drew a nod of understanding from Emma. "Hermione told me the same thing, says she deliberately messes up her room sometimes to keep Betsy happy. That little elf is devoted to her."

"Dobby still wants to work, but he now wants paid for that work. While that might seem perfectly natural to you both, it's certainly not in our world. All his fellow house elves think Dobby is crazy, a disgrace for wanting payment for doing what he's supposed to do. To put him into a magical household would cause chaos amongst the other elves, I probably could get him into Hogwarts but the little guy was really hoping for a family..."

"...and you just naturally thought of a family that seems to be growing all the time." Emma was smiling in Luna's direction as she said this. Dan though was more business like. "I don't know if we could afford a servant and where would he live? Our house seems to be full now more often than not."

"He wants a galleon a month and will live in a corner of your loft..." Sirius enjoyed watching his two friends' rather predictable reactions to his last statement.

"Indeed he will not live in a corner of our loft..."

"A galleon a month! That's not even pocket money..."

"He would build himself a little cosy nest, and be very happy with that. The money thing is more about symbolism than economics, Dobby gets paid therefore he's free - the amount he's paid is inconsequential. When I told him I was going to enquire if the family of Harry Potter wanted a house elf, he immediately dropped the price to a Knut a month."

Both took some convincing they wouldn't be exploiting the little creature and wanted time to speak with Harry and Hermione first - before making a decision.

Harry found himself dancing with Hermione, Parvati and Luna, Neville and Padma weren't for being separated tonight. This gave Hermione time to talk with her parents and advise them to give Dobby a job - and a home.

Hermione danced in Harry's arms, delighted they were regaining their mobility and fitness. She was also delighted for her two friends, with not a hint of jealousy at the rings they wore. Hermione already knew there would be an engagement ring on her finger, a present for her seventeenth birthday. That it would be joined by a wedding ring the following summer made her happier than she had the words to express. As a couple they would still disagree, argue and might even resort to the occasional fight. What their bond did though was ensure they knew how they felt about one another. Yes each had faults that the other could find irritating but they loved each other - faults and all.

-o- present -o-

Hermione was drawn out of her musings by someone calling her name, she felt Harry tense beside her as Padma and Neville casually took up supporting position behind them. Harry and Padma had personal experience of Hermione meeting people she knew before heading off to Hogwarts, this might be four girls rushing toward them but they were taking no chances. Both intended to make certain Hermione wouldn't be needing to see a healer after this meeting.

"Hermione Granger, is that really you?"

"No, Melissa, I'm the wicked witch of the west. What can I do for you?"

"You can tell us who your stylist and personal trainer are - you look fantastic!"

She studied Joanne, finding none of the sarcasm or smirks she expected to accompany a comment like that, Hermione looked to Harry for help.

"Hey, I always think you look fantastic."

Hermione had no way of knowing just how much she'd changed in the year and a half since these girls had last laid eyes on her. The frizzy hair that was the source of so many jibes was now soft brown curls and those two front teeth perfectly matched their lovely pearly white neighbours. All her exercising had also had a very desirable effect on her body, as did the confident way she walked down the street holding Harry's hand. "Eh, I don't have a stylist and I exercise with Harry every day. You four almost got hit by a bus, running across the road in front of it to ask me that?"

Melissa silenced Joanne with a look before answering. "No, we came over to thank you - and say hi. Things are so much better now in school since you stomped on Dudley's gang, Tony came back on crutches and then his family finally moved away altogether."

Joanne and the others nodded their agreement. "We searched for you all last summer to thank you, but you were nowhere to be seen."

"Oh, we spent the full summer traveling, I was only in Crawley at the end of August..."

Padma had certainly picked up on Hermione's wariness as these girls approached, she also noticed the envious glances they were stealing at Hermione and Harry. She had learned from Hermione that muggle school had been a lonely place for her friend, Padma didn't need to be a genius to deduct that these four played a part in that loneliness. It was time for some retrospective payback, and provide these four with a real focus for that jealousy.

"Starting off in Florida was brilliant! Are we doing that again next summer?"

Susan was also no slouch, spotting the tension before figuring out what Padma was doing. "Oh I would love to go back to Japan, that was just amazing and Auntie talks about it all the time."

"Sorry Susan, and I hate to disagree with my girlfriend, but Rome was the highlight of the whole summer..."

Lavender hadn't cottoned on to what was happening here, that made her outburst so much more believable though. She had been listening to stories of that holiday since Parvati returned from it, Lavender certainly knew which part sounded best to her. "Neville, Rome was better than Harry's private tropical island! - are you nuts?"

Harry settled the matter. "This summer our holidays will have to be built around a wedding, we won't be able to do much planning until that's arranged."

The four girls were left looking at each other in disbelief, they'd heard the wild rumours but here was the proof. Hermione Granger, the girl who they wouldn't give the time of day to had somehow fallen on her feet and had every girl's dream in the palm of her hand - certainly these four girls' dream. A gorgeous, rich and actually titled boyfriend, sometimes life just wasn't fair.

They had been searching all summer to see if the rumours were true, and, if they were, to begin the process of working their way into Granger's good graces. Here she stood though, surrounded by friends and hand in hand with the aforementioned gorgeous boyfriend. Melissa was left clutching at straws.

"Will you be coming home for Christmas?" Hermione's shake of her head shattered any hopes they had of ingratiating themselves into her clearly wealthy company. It was always going to be a hard task, but the girl never being in Crawley just make that mission impossible.

"Sorry but no. Harry's godfather, Lord Black, is getting engaged at Christmas. We will be spending the entire holiday with him in London. It was nice meeting you again but we need to go. This is the first time some of my friends have been in Crawley, we're showing them around."



None of the four were quite brazen enough to invite themselves along - it was a close run thing though.

As the friends walked away, Padma of course had a comment. "Well, that certainly went better than the last time we met the natives of Crawley."

Her sister couldn't contain her curiosity. "Why, what happened?"

"Oh, five guys tried to beat us up. One of them was even stupid enough to punch Hermione in the mouth."

"Let me guess, his name was Tony and he ended up on crutches?"

"Why Susan, your aunt would be proud of you. That is certainly deduction worthy of an auror." Padma couldn't hold her giggle though, she was in a very good mood.

Lavender was only paying partial attention, the shops were distracting her but she wanted to ask Parvati something. "I thought Ravensclaws were supposed to be bookworms, this lot are more Gryffindor than we are!"

-oOoOo-

Hermione had explained to her parents that, as Betsy was her personal elf, there would be no conflict with Dobby in Crawley. The elves already considered her Lady Potter, and Dobby would be the Grangers' elf.

Emma couldn't get her head around having Dobby living in the loft, there was also no way he was going to walk around wearing a pillow case. Dan and Emma were currently in negotiations with the elf, it was hard though as Dobby was currently in floods of tears.

"If this isn't big enough, Dobby, we could..."

"Oh no, Missis Granger, this is far too big for Dobby. This is a room..."

"Dobby, it's a storage cupboard under the stairs. We emptied it and put that little cot in there, we thought you'd be more comfortable here than in the loft. We bought you some outfits, do you like them?"

Both Emma and Dan had been coached not to say clothes. Dobby may be a free elf now but that just wasn't a word you used around house elves.

There were three children's outfits on hangers in the walk-in cupboard, Dobby's eyes were drawn to the little track suit. It was brightly coloured, had zips and pockets - and Dobby had never seen anything so fine in all his life. "Dobby loves them, and Dobby already thinks he's going to really like working here."

With a shake of hands the deal was done, the Grangers had just hired a very dedicated house elf.

-oOoOo-

They had spent Tuesday night staying in Grimmauld to make accessing Kings Cross easier. Breakfast was already a lively affair before the pair of Gringotts owls arrived. Both Henrica and Luna were stunned into silence at what they contained.

"Harry, I have a Gringotts bank draft here for ninety thousand galleons. Would you care to explain why?"

"It's your first instalment from the basilisk carcass, Henrica, it will be a few months yet before the final figure is known. As a victim of the creature, Luna should have about half of that. That's simply because there were more victims than rescuers."

This received a nod of agreement from Luna. "Mine is for forty five thousand, that's an awful lot of gold, Harry."

"Everyone who was a victim gets the same, Luna, you, Hannah, Susan and Parvati will all get that today. Padma and Neville will receive the same as Henrica."

It was a puzzled Sirius who asked the obvious question. "Where are the owls with your bank drafts?"

Hermione was almost blushing as she answered. "We sorted that out yesterday when we were at Gringotts, it was getting embarrassing. Everywhere I went there would be goblins bowing to me, I hope it dies down soon."

Emma could put two and two together quicker than most, and was sure she had the right answer here. "So, Parvati is terrified of facing everyone on the express later today - and those cheques just happen to be delivered this morning?"

His ruse might have been easily read but Harry was unrepentant. "This was an attack on me and my family, I'll do everything I can to protect them..."

Sirius' loud laughter cut through anything else Harry was going to say. "This is genius! Instead of Parvati being picked on, you'll have a train full of people wishing they had been petrified. Luna was out for about a week and the rest of them were fed the potion the same day."

The news also pleased Henrica. "I didn't say anything before but I'm traveling to Hogwarts on the express with you lot, there will be a few aurors on the train too. We were worried in case there might be trouble but this will make the entire journey a party. Someone better tell the trolley lady to stock up well, I've a feeling she's going to be busy."

There was a party atmosphere taking over the breakfast table but Hermione noticed Luna's smile didn't quite reach her eyes. "Is there something wrong, Luna, I thought you were looking forward to going back to Hogwarts?"

"Oh, I am. It's just all this talk of family, there's only me and my father."

"Luna, when we found out you'd been petrified, Harry was ready to take the castle apart stone by stone to find out what did that to you. When he says family, you, Miss Luna Lovegood, are certainly considered part of that family."

"Really?"

"Really, really."

Luna's eyes now sparkled to match the wide smile she was wearing. Since her mother died, Luna had longed to be a family again. It would seem she was now part of this one too, something she was very happy with.

-oOoOo-

It was no coincidence that the trial of Lucius Malfoy was held on the same day the children returned to Hogwarts. Like Amelia, a lot of the Wizengamot members would have just waved their young loved ones off on the Express, and then left for the ministry to try the bastard who attempted to murder every single one of those very same children.

Malfoy was guilty, of that there was no doubt. In the past though, that wouldn't necessarily mean Lucius would be punished. A new wing at St Mungo's wouldn't get him out of this one though, not that he had access to funds to even attempt a deal like that. Today was all about showing the British wizarding public they could trust their ministry to make the hard choices and protect them. Since a lot of the parents were in London anyway to see their children off, the public galleries were packed to capacity. They were currently watching a Lucius Malfoy who had certainly lost his sneer of superiority. To be fair, sitting chained to a chair inside an iron cage while awaiting trial for the attempted massacre of the nation's schoolchildren would have that effect on most people.

Sirius, Ramrao and Barchoke sat together at the trial, listening while Lucius under truth serum congratulated himself for slipping the diary to the wog witch that was a close friend of Crow's. It was only after returning home and reading the Dumbledore expose that he realised the diary was a horcrux. His house elf was then sent to infiltrate Hogwarts and retrieve the horcrux, only to return empty-handed. It wasn't until after reading about the chamber incident in the Prophet, Lucius realised he'd slipped the diary to the wrong Patil witch.

He confirmed that no one else knew what he had done, and it was purely concern for their son that saw his wife withdraw Draco from Hogwarts. Lucius then condemned himself to the entire magical population of Britain, including any death eaters still at large, by confirming it was pure self-preservation that sent his elf off to Hogwarts. While the Malfoys were denied access to their funds, the dark lord's return would be an utter disaster for them. It was also noticed that Lucius was the only Malfoy in the Wizengamot Chamber, not even his wife was here to offer any support.

With Malfoy's goose well and truly cooked by his own confession, Amelia then showed Auror Tonks' memory to all the people crammed inside the chamber. The ministry wanted everyone to see what the outcome of Malfoy's ministrations could have been. To those intently watching the events unfold, Tom Riddle's appearance was every bit as terrifying as the basilisk.

The vote on his guilt was a mere formality, a unanimous answer quickly being returned from the Wizengamot members. It was then left to Amos to pass sentence.

"Lucius Malfoy, you have been found guilty of unleashing a terrible horror into Hogwarts, with callous disregard for the welfare of the children being taught there - your own son included. It is nothing short of miraculous that there were no fatalities - otherwise I wouldn't have hesitated in using the death penalty for this case."

This drew gasps from around the Wizengamot Chamber as people realised this was not Albus Dumbledore they were now dealing with. Amos Diggory appeared not to be the forgiving sort, even the Lestranges had escaped the death penalty. The attack on the Hufflepuff students though had badly shaken the Chief Warlock, his own son had been mere yards from the point of the basilisk attack.

"You will spend the rest of your life in the high security wing of Azkaban. It was also my intention to fine the Malfoy family rather heavily, and use that gold installing wards at Hogwarts to ensure nothing like this could ever be repeated. Thanks to our friends from the goblin nation, and those four brave and generous students who destroyed the basilisk, our children today return to a much safer Hogwarts. I still intend to impose a financial penalty though, twenty percent of the Malfoy fortune will be awarded to the ministry. This will be allocated to the DMLE, its purpose to help equip and train more brave aurors like the ones who protected our children at Hogwarts."

This proved a very popular decision, the profile of the DMLE had never been higher.

Edmund watched with everyone else as a sobbing and broken Lucius Malfoy sank into the floor. Personally, he thought the death penalty might have been kinder than spending the rest of your life in Azkaban. The twenty percent fine meant he would leave his

daughter's betrothal to Draco intact for the moment, the news flashing around Platform Nine and three quarters that the Longbottom lad had just gotten betrothed also affected this decision.

He would call in on Narcissa before going home, give her the expected news about Lucius and then see what future concessions he could wring out of the Malfoys. If Edmund even suspected Draco was as stupid as his father, his betrothal to Pansy would be over before the blond ponce could spit. Lucius may have wormed his way into high society but the Malfoy name could become poison for many years to come.

Edmund would have to give serious consideration to whether he wanted his grandchildren lumbered with such a disadvantage. Thankfully he had a few years yet before finalising any arrangements. Narcissa would know all this, and also that should Draco's match to Pansy be dissolved, she would certainly struggle to find another suitable betrothal for her son. Edmund should be able to squeeze more Parkinson control over the Malfoy fortune, Narcissa wasn't really in any position to refuse.

A/N Thanks for reading

## Chapter 49

Parvati had been pleasantly surprised at the positive reactions she'd received on the express. Then again, she'd never ventured outside the two compartments they had occupied and Professor Hobson had stayed close. Now, the professor was at the staff table, Susan and Hannah at Hufflepuff while Padma, Hermione, Luna and Harry were all heading to sit at their own house table.

She still wasn't alone though, Neville had offered his arm and Lavender was by her side, Ginny and Colin were leading the way to a space at Gryffindor that would accommodate the five of them. Unfortunately, this free space was closer to Ronald Weasley than they would usually sit.

"Hey Longbottom, looks like Lucius Malfoy isn't the only one who can't tell the Patils apart. You do know your girlfriend is sitting at the Ravenclaw table, right - or did they come as a pair?" Ron was laughing at his own joke, that was until he realised he was the only one laughing.

The way Neville was glaring at Ron was certainly enough to deter any sensible person from laughing at the redhead's supposed joke. After all, Neville Longbottom had just fought a basilisk AND killed Voldemort - this was not someone you wanted to upset.

"Since Padma is wearing the Longbottom betrothal ring, and Parvati clearly isn't, that should tell even someone as thick as you who this is on my arm. That same ring also makes Parvati my sister, would you stand back and let anyone say horrible things about your sister?"

This had a red faced Ron on his feet. "Don't you dare say anything about my sister, she wasn't the one stupid enough to write in a cursed diary."

"Oh I think the whole school knows who the stupid one is in the Weasley family, you prove it every time you open your mouth. Talk about my sister like that again and I'll call you out, this is the only warning you're getting Weasley..."

Before Ron could say anymore, Percy intervened. "Ron, sit down and shut up..."

"Oh, take his side again, why don't you! He's sticking up for someone who isn't even his sister yet my own brother stabs me in the back. Must be nice to have a supportive family..."

"Perhaps if you weren't such a jerk, we just might. Parvati's been through a horrible experience ..." Ginny found herself being interrupted by a now snarling Ron.

"...an experience she caused - and then got paid a bloody fortune for it too! That doesn't sound too horrible to me."

Neville was just about to launch himself at Ron when his head of house made her presence known. "Ronald Weasley, go to my office at once."

"What, and miss dinner?"

"I shall have the elves prepare a sandwich for you..."

"...a SANDWICH!"

"You have just gained an extra week's worth of detentions for your disrespectful attitude toward me, that's on top of the week I was originally going to give you. If you are not in my office inside the next five minutes, our new High Inquisitor can start her first day on the job by taking you home - and then explaining to your parents the reason why you are no longer welcome inside Hogwarts."

It had been reported in the Prophet that the new High Inquisitor was Neville's Grandmother, Ron rightly thought that he would receive no sympathy from that quarter. With his head down, he began making his way out the hall.

McGonagall though made sure he still heard her address to the rest of Gryffindor. "When you all arrived at Hogwarts for the very first time, I told you then that your house would be your family. One of our family was hurt by Lord Voldemort, that another member of our family made him pay for that hurt makes me prouder than I can say. Parvati needs the support of her family and friends at this time, her Gryffindor family will provide that support - or I'll know the reason why."



As McGonagall headed back to the staff table, Parvati found herself sitting between Neville and Lavender with the rest of the house rallying around. It appeared as if Ronald Weasley's was the only disconcerting voice in Gryffindor.

Harry felt it was now safe to release his grip on Hermione and Padma, both had wanted to rush to Parvati's aid. The confrontation had been heard by the entire great hall, Ronald Weasley and subtlety weren't exactly close friends. Harry had no intention of letting two angry witches now focus their ire on him though so quickly offered his reasoning.

"Neville always had the situation under control and I saw McGonagall keeping a close eye on them, she was moving the minute the mouth without a brain started speaking - or should that be shouting. We know what would have happened if Ron had been foolish enough to reach for his wand, Neville would have wiped the floor with him. By us not interfering, McGonagall was able to deal with it as a Gryffindor House matter."

"Can I borrow your sword, Hermione? I want to go and cut Ron's sandwich into bite sized pieces - then ram them down his throat with my fist."

"Eugh, you'd touch that mouth?"

"Hermione, I'm a betrothed witch - and I wouldn't be able to eat my dinner if I even thought about shoving sandwiches in any of his other orifices."

"Girls, you're frightening our friends - well, at least spoiling their appetites. Relax everyone, they're only joking. We're still the same people we were before all this happened..."

"Oh Harry, does that mean I can stop bowing every time I meet you now?" Luna's sing-song voice stopped all conversation as everyone stared at her. She couldn't hold her pretence though and burst out laughing. "You should see your faces!"

"I told you we shouldn't have let her eat all that chocolate on the train. Ladies curtsy, Luna, not bow - don't get it wrong again." Harry couldn't hold his laughter either, soon being joined by most of the

table as they figured out they'd been had by the little blonde first year.

The Ravenclaws had gotten used to seeing Harry or Hermione on the front page of the Prophet, it wasn't exactly a gigantic leap to add Padma to that group too - especially when the three of them just acted as they normally would.

At the Slytherin table, the overwhelming emotion was that of relief. Crow's notion that only the person responsible should be blamed seemed to be prevalent amongst their fellow students. Longbottom jumping on Weasley for haranguing the main victim of these attacks suited them down to the ground. It deflected attention away from those who had fled the castle while reinforcing the belief that only the guilty should be punished.

Draco was trying to blend in so hard, he was in danger of disappearing. He of course knew his father's trial was today, and no sane person questioned what the verdict of that trial would be. His concern was purely the sentence, would his father live through this? Would the ministry punish what was left of the Malfoy family with severe financial penalties? Pansy was glued to Draco's side, understanding exactly what he was going through. Their betrothal may be hanging by a thread but she would be here to support Draco, no matter what happened to his father - or what her father said.

-oOoOo-

Lucius could have used support like that, Lucius would currently accept support from anywhere. The guards had flung him into this dark, dank cell, and the reality that he was never getting out of here completely destroyed any fortitude Lucius had left. He was crying like a baby but his torture was just beginning. The dementors were undoubtedly horrors but having his mental sister-in-law in the next cell was taking things a step too far.

The imprisoned death eaters were starved of news and had just been presented with a feast. Lucius was constantly bombarded with questions from all sides, Bellatrix though just wouldn't give up. Since neither he or Bella were going anywhere for the foreseeable future, Lucius decided that answering her was the only way to gain some respite. In his state of emotional turmoil, it never occurred to him that the crazy bitch might not like the answers Lucius had to give.

She could be heard screaming at him by everyone in the high security wing. "Our master entrusted you with one of his greatest treasures and you gave it away - all for a bit of revenge on a boy? Why didn't you just kill the little bastard? At least then you would have ended up in here for doing something constructive and worthwhile. Our master also entrusted me with one of his treasures, I would gladly die before letting anything happen to it."

The family squabble continued unabated and in the same vein, Bella was verbally tearing strips off Lucius - and promising more if she ever got her hands on him. This was as near as the residents of the high security wing got to entertainment, and all were discovering secrets at the same time. Lucius' revelation that their master had a muggle father though was a revelation too far for Bella. She was yelling that he was a liar while pounding the stone wall between their cells in an effort to get at Lucius and rip his tongue out for even suggesting something as vile as that about her beloved master.

Augustus Rookwood lay on his thin mattress and absorbed all the information being shouted about like a sponge, he was very good at that. Augustus had entered the ranks of the death eaters with his eyes wide open, and his own personal goals. After suffering dragon pox as a child, Augustus had survived but the disease left its mark - not all of them visible. While his face had enough pockmarks to make people wonder if his parents had allowed him to be used as a chew toy for their pet dog, the after-effects of the potentially fatal disease ran much deeper.

While Augustus' intellect was approaching the genius level, his magical power struggled to scrape average on a good day. Combine that handicap with a complexion that resembled Swiss cheese that was going slightly off, and you could perhaps understand why his time at Hogwarts was not a happy one. The ministry was also disappointing, yes he got to work in the department of mysteries but his lack of power meant the goal of being an unspeakable was denied him. With no family name worth speaking of, and certainly no fortune, he had grasped the opportunity to don the death eater regalia with both hands. Wearing that uniform and mask, Augustus was just as handsome and powerful as anyone else.

What a time he'd had, actually losing his virginity during his first raid on a mudblood's home. Augustus soon fell in love with the double

life he was leading. He'd spy for his new master during the day, then at night receive his rewards as the death eaters rampaged throughout Britain - wherever they wanted - unopposed.

His master was smarter than he was, and certainly more powerful - Augustus didn't give two hoots if the dark lord's father was a muggle or a baboon. He himself held no pure blood superiority beliefs, Augustus was honest enough to admit that he became a death eater simply to access what was denied him otherwise - sex and power.

What Augustus heard here today provided his first spark of hope for over a decade, hope that those days of power and plenty might return once more. He of course knew what a horcrux was, though didn't think it was possible for an individual to make more than one. Here again was proof of his master's supreme intellect and unbelievable magical power. If Bella had access to one of their master's horcruxes, Augustus was certain he could bring their master back from the dead. With Dumbledore apparently having fled the country, and the Potter brat living as a goblin, Britain stood wide open for the dark lord's return.

Over the years, Augustus had of course speculated on ways and means to escape from this hellhole. The stumbling block had always been a pressing enough reason to risk his life attempting to escape Azkaban - only to then spend what was left of that life trying to hide from the ministry. He'd been raised with nothing so didn't find the physical conditions in here too severe. A dementor really had to be parked right outside his door for their debilitating effects to penetrate his occlumency, leaving him free to reflect on those stored memories that were by far and away the happiest days of his life.

If he somehow got out of here and then returned his master to life, Augustus was sure his master would reward him by allowing his most loyal death eater to make many more of those wonderful memories. The one memory he was really looking forward to creating was the slow, painful death of that traitorous bastard, Igor Karkaroff. Even if he didn't get to torture and kill the bastard responsible for him being in Azkaban personally, Augustus was certain a grateful dark lord would at least let him watch as their master carried out his own brand of retribution on the traitor. He could easily console himself in the knowledge that their master would certainly inflict a lot more pain on Karkaroff before allowing the traitor to die than Augustus ever could.

With that sweet thought, it was time to plan - Augustus almost felt alive again.

-oOoOo-

Harry and Hermione felt alive again as they practiced in the room of requirements with their swords. Since their bodies were now fully healed, their morning training made them feel as if things were back to normal - normal for them that is. Bill and Sirius would both be putting in their usual appearance at the weekend, with Sirius promising to consider animagus training for the four. He was trying to gather together some reading material beforehand, with their actual training probably not beginning until the new year. It was a sweaty but happy couple who were making their way back to Ravenclaw, only to find Draco and Pansy in their path.

After waiting on the couple, Draco approached - ensuring that both his empty hands were clearly visible. "Centurion Crow, it would seem I owe you my thanks more than once. I was already in your debt for speaking out about only punishing the guilty, a note from my mother has seen that debt increase. Your generosity in providing new wards for Hogwarts saved the Malfoy fortune, and probably my betrothal to Pansy. My father has been sentenced to life in Azkaban, a punishment I think he deserves. Had you not stopped his plans, the name of Malfoy would have been cursed in Britain for centuries."

Harry could detect no deceit or malice coming from the Slytherin, and the concern radiating from Pansy was certainly genuine. Draco had effectively lost his father, his wealth was locked down and it would seem Pansy's parents were questioning if their daughter should remain with the Malfoy heir. That was a lot of hits to take for anyone, far less someone who had been taught the world should bow at his feet simply because of his last name.

"Mr Malfoy, I did what I needed to do in the hope of protecting Parvati, that you too benefited from this requires no thanks. As to Hogwarts, I am her champion and had to help our friend who was trapped down there. Those wards would have already been in place if Dumbledore had been kicked out before the summer, so again no thanks is necessary. I see no debt between us so please don't consider there to be one."

With the formal part over, Harry tried a different tack. "Draco, we both got off on the wrong foot, I would also like to think we are both different people since that first meeting. I would say we are a way off being friends but I hope have moved past the point of being considered enemies. Your father is paying for his crimes and I bear you and your mother no ill will. Goblins preach live and let live, I think we could do with some of that here."

Harry offered his hand for shaking, and Draco hesitantly took it. The world shifted for the Slytherin at this point in time - had that been a pureblood he'd just made the same offer to, Draco would have been beholden to them for the rest of his life. Crow had treated him with honour and integrity yet logically dismissed any claim of debt between them.

Hermione knew she couldn't interfere between Harry and Draco but had also picked up on Pansy's concern, this was somewhere she could offer advice. "Pansy, I know Draco has been cast from the Black family, I also know Lord Black wouldn't sit back and watch you two parted - if you really wanted to be together. Betrothal is not an option available for Harry and me, that doesn't mean we won't fight like hell to stay together. If that is something you would consider, Sirius is in the castle every weekend. I'm certain he would at least speak to you both.'

Like Draco, Pansy didn't know how to handle this approach. She was as certain as she could possibly be that this offer was genuine, as was the thought behind it. As she'd been taught, Pansy was looking for the ulterior motive for making this offer, and coming up empty. This girl had everything - fame, power, smarts, looks, the heir to one of the biggest fortunes in Britain as her serious boyfriend - Hermione Granger didn't need to waste her time playing Pansy Parkinson for a fool.

"Thank you, Hermione, that is certainly something Draco and I will talk about."

Neither couple thought this brief meeting could have gone much better. Just having two purebloods considering different opinions counted as a victory to Harry and Hermione. Draco and Pansy were left reeling. He expected to find himself beholden to Crow, instead they'd shaken hands and a tentative offer of help with their betrothal troubles - namely Pansy's father. Neither knew how Edmund

Parkinson would take an approach by Lord Black on the matter, that left them thinking they would use that option only as a last resort.

-oOoOo-

Hogwarts students once more adapted to their new normal, and life proceeded as usual - classes still had to be taught and there were exams to be passed. Helena was keeping Harry informed on the progress of her fellow ghosts, the current prognosis that they would be back amongst the living for Christmas was still on track.

Dumbledore's absence was barely noticed, the former headmaster wasn't exactly missed.

Augusta was trying to make some sense of his former office, getting the elves to place a lot of the more outlandish nick-nacks into storage. Someone at her door halted the redecorating, only for something even more outlandish to walk into the room. Her defence professor was wearing a set of robes so bright, Henrica Hobson would have struggled to look good in them. On Gilderoy, the overall effect landed somewhere between hideous and ridiculous.

"What can I do for you, Professor."

"It's these new wards, Madam Longbottom, I don't think they're working properly. In fact, I'm sure I've uncovered a serious flaw in them."

The thought that this ponce could in any way possibly be right never entered Augusta's head, all she was thinking about was a means to get him out of here as quickly as possible. That applied to both her office and Hogwarts.

"You are the first person I've heard complaining about the new wards. Can you tell me specifically what you think is wrong with them?"

"Oh, I know they are there to prevent all sorts of nastiness passing into the school but I fear they may be set too severe. Since we returned to the castle almost two weeks ago, I haven't had one piece of fan mail. Betty Crocker has never gone this long without writing before, the wards must be filtering my fan mail out. I hardly think that letters from my fans would count as dark or evil."

Augusta was going to take great delight in explaining the facts of life to this arse. "Professor Lockhart, four young students - my grandson amongst them - went down into that chamber and fought not only a basilisk but Lord Voldemort himself. Meanwhile, it was widely reported that the castle's defence against the dark arts professor was the first person from Hogwarts to arrive at Hogsmeade Village..."

"I ran all the way there to raise the alarm..."

"...a job that had already been done by Minerva and two of the aurors using the floo system. Instead of assisting with the evacuation, you ran for your life. I would say that was the reason for your lack of fan mail, not what literally are some of the best protective wards in the entire world."

You would have thought Gilderoy had been slapped by the way he reacted to that analysis. "Don't be preposterous, Madam, I am Gilderoy Lockhart - my fans would never desert me! I'm five-time winner of Witch Weekly's Most Charming Smile Award, does that sound like someone who wouldn't get any fan mail? You need to see about having these wards repaired, otherwise, I might be forced to leave Hogwarts."

Augusta was delighted the new wards protected the students. If they also got rid of this useless ponce too, she would probably kiss Barchoke the next time they met. "I shall ask Assistant Ambassador Weasley about them when he comes to the castle on Saturday. After all, before his latest promotion, he was a Gringotts curse-breaker."

Mentioning Bill Weasley was perhaps rubbing Gilderoy's nose in it more than a little bit, the redheaded wizard was everything Lockhart pretended to be. He flounced out of her office in a swirl of robes and ringlets, not a happy wizard.

-oOoOo-

Crow's Marauders now looked upon their tutors with something akin to awe, Dumbledore at the height of his powers would have struggled to gain this level of attention from his students. The only exception to this was a heartbroken Colin, the Longbottom ring on



Padma's finger was taking some getting used to for the young wizard. Padma was his first crush, seeing her now betrothed to Neville almost had him in tears every time he saw that ring. Ginny and Luna were certainly helping him understand the Indian beauty simply didn't feel that way about him, and how could he hate Neville when his fellow Gryffindor was going out of his way to ensure the rest of the house didn't make fun of him over the situation.

Fun was certainly back on the agenda as they practiced shields / stinging hex exercises. Since they now all knew exactly what getting hit with a stinging hex felt like, they were allowed to wear dragon hide tunics as they duelled - face shields had been made mandatory. Harry had supplied sets of face shields and tunics purely for this purpose, allowing enough that they could be swapped over while the current duel was taking place. Their aim was now to help their students increase the power of their shields, the only real way to do that was to have someone firing spells at them until it collapsed. There was no reason not to let the dragon hide absorb most of the spell that would eventually get through though.

Their plans were to have them dodging and shielding after Christmas, building up experience to help with the difficult decision of when to do one or the other.

They were firing two stinging hexes at their opponent's shield before then having to receive a couple in return. Anyone whose shield protected them from five or over got cheered, and a chocolate frog. The four fourth years were now a big part of this class too, so much so that Gryffindor, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw quidditch practices were now arranged around it. The Slytherins had unopposed use of the pitch every Tuesday evening.

Augusta stood with Henrica, there purely to observe but brimming with pride at the same time. As usual, the four second years were concentrating on what they were doing and had totally forgotten the adults were present.

The noise being generated from the duelling meant the two witches didn't need to worry about their conversation being overheard. "This is what defence lessons are supposed to be like, not students swinging from the chandelier because the professor ran away terrified. Even the older boys are hanging on their every word, and working seamlessly together as a team to make everything run

smoothly. If every class was taught this well, there wouldn't be a need for me inside Hogwarts."

This drew a wry chuckle from Henrica. "Minerva said pretty much the same when she observed them, she was every bit as impressed. Can I assume you're having no luck in finding someone suitable to take over from Lockhart?"

"Oh, I have the very person in mind, I just need the all clear from the ministry to offer him the job. Let's be honest here, Padma, Hermione, Harry or my Neville can all teach defence better than the person Dumbledore appointed. The proof of that is currently right in front of us."

There was certainly never going to be an argument from Henrica on that subject. Augusta was on a rant though, her anger directed at the former headmaster. "Dumbledore seemed to be building his own little empire here, rather forgetting the people he employed were supposed to be teaching students. Snape was horrible at teaching, yet the board could do nothing because Albus protected him. Harry has managed to force through some exceedingly positive changes, I would certainly include you in that list but it's now up to me to finish the job he started."

Henrica had always gotten the impression Augusta Longbottom was a formidable witch, seeing her impassioned about her new job just confirmed that. In the best British bulldog tradition, she was going to take Hogwarts by the scruff of the neck and shake all those not doing their jobs properly right out of the castle.

"I could never be classed as an expert on muggles, though I'm very proud to say I have two very good friends who are of that persuasion. That's something our muggle studies professor certainly couldn't claim, I doubt if she's actually met any. Even with the time I've spent in the company of the Grangers, I can recognise that most of what she's teaching is wrong. I've sent a copy of the coursework to Dan and Emma for their opinion, I'm not expecting good news."

The new High Inquisitor was left shaking her head at her next revelation. "Minerva refused to comment on the divination teacher, saying her own opinion was this subject should not be part of the Hogwarts curriculum. After visiting the class, I'm inclined to agree. The students are being taught the methods of divination but, unless

they have the gift, they are wasting their time. You might as well hand a stick to a muggle and tell them how to make something float. They could learn the wand movements and announce Wingardium Leviosa until they're blue in the face - they still won't be able to make anything float!"

"Is this a bigger job than you expected?"

"Henrica, I honestly can't believe the mess Dumbledore has left behind. Apart from those I've mentioned, when Neville arrived at Hogwarts there was a bigoted ghost teaching his own version of history, a death eater teaching potions and a Voldemort possessed wizard instructing the students on defence. We've had trolls and a basilisk, what's next - dementors?"

When it was all put together like that, it really was a damning indictment of the previous headmaster. "Dumbledore always gave me the impression that he wasn't used to people saying no to him. He'd gotten his own way for so long that he began to believe he could do no wrong. More than once I had to remind him that he was not my employer, and that the course I am teaching has already been agreed upon - purposely to bring Hogwarts up to the same standard as the rest of Europe."

The lesson was now finishing and all the first years sat on the floor as hot chocolate appeared in front of each student. The relaxed way they all accepted this, and the critique of tonight's lesson that followed astonished Augusta. They had started tonight's lesson by explaining exactly what they hope to achieve, now they were all sitting and discussing whether they had achieved their goals. Questions and answers flowed easily in both directions, it appeared an informal arrangement yet respect was there from all sides.

Harry then gave them a general outline of what they would be doing next week before calling it a night. The four fourth years then led the first years back to their dorms, Fred Weasley happily leading the Slytherins' down to the dungeons.

When they had left, Augusta pulled Neville and Padma into an embrace. "I am so proud of you, all four of you. I have spent my time here observing professors teaching their subject, what I just witnessed was up there with the best of them. That was simply

brilliant - and restored an old witch's faith that Hogwarts can once more be the premier magical school in the world."

Neville was beaming at the praise, they all worked hard preparing for this class but really enjoyed passing on what they had learned. "Thanks, gran. We were hoping to hold a Christmas Party for them the last week of term, who do we need to ask for permission?"

"You certainly have mine, and I can't see Minerva objecting. If they work like that every week then a party is certainly well deserved. First year students casting shields, I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it for myself."

Padma was also beaming at the praise, and basking in the acceptance she was being shown as Neville's betrothed. "Professor Weasley taught it to us in first year, we didn't see any reason for not teaching it to them."

This saw a sigh of frustration emitted from Augusta. "Have you any idea how difficult my job becomes when three of the best teachers in the school don't work for Hogwarts?"

It was a totally serious Neville who faced his grandmother. "...but gran, there's four of us!"

This saw Hermione theatrically palming her face. "Oh great, just what we need - Neville channelling Padma."

This saw a tickling hex heading in Hermione's direction, only for Padma's hex to be deflected by her bracelet shield - straight to Augusta. Neville and Harry had the counter cast in seconds, only for Augusta to burst out laughing anyway. The fact that her once painfully shy grandson now felt confident enough to joke with her was certainly an occasion worthy of laughter.

-oOoOo-

There wasn't much laughter amongst the three people in the minister's office, Cornelius couldn't quite believe what he was hearing. Amelia spelled it out very simply.

"Cornelius, I know these people. You try to give them different levels of award, they will throw them back in your face - and all the gains you've made in the last year will be for nothing."

The minister was a political animal and knew what this group publicly refusing ministerial awards would do to his popularity ratings, he also explained the other side of the equation to his head of DMLE. "You may be right, Amelia, but think of the alternative. Can you really see me surviving trying to award a Swedish veela, an Indian witch and a muggle born an Order of Merlin, First Class? The Wizengamot would have me out on my ear."

Amelia knew this would be a tough sell, the head of the DMLE also knew she was right though. "You're looking at this all wrong, Cornelius. Where you see a veela, I see one of Hogwarts' most popular professors - a professor who will become engaged to Lord Black on Boxing Day. I already have my invitation. Where you see a witch of Indian origin, I see a brilliant young lady of ancient magical lineage that just became betrothed to Neville Longbottom. They fought bravely together, can you honestly see him accepting a higher award than his wife to be?"

This news had Cornelius floundering since none of it had appeared in the Prophet. With the public perception and level of adulation of this group, the last thing the Prophet wanted to do was alienate any of them by forging ahead and making any announcements - they were waiting on official notification from those involved. Amelia then went in for the kill, she was well aware which award would cause the biggest outcry in the Wizengamot chamber.

"Hermione Granger is certainly a muggle born, she is also academically head of her year group - need I remind you who else is in that year group? This witch is also a friend of the goblin nation and you weren't in the Chamber of Secrets to see what happened just after the beast had been killed. A twelve year old girl took on the biggest bloody basilisk the world has ever seen - with a goblin sword! Every goblin down there was treating Hermione like some kind of warrior princess - I have it on very good authority that Ragnok is strutting around Gringotts as pleased as Punch that his gamble to make that award to her has paid off far more handsomely than he could ever have imagined. Do you really want to insult them too?"

Like any good auror, Amelia had been trained to use her big spells when they counted most - she released them here. "So, you have a brilliant young witch whose boyfriend, Centurion Crow, is totally besotted with her. Only goblin culture stands between that couple becoming betrothed too. She will be welcomed into Gringotts with open arms and don't forget, that same boyfriend has a massive choice to make before he's seventeen. Surely you can see how the ministry publicly insulting Hermione must affect Harry's decision?"

Cornelius now had his head in his hands. "Of course I can see that! How is that any worse though than trying to push it through the Wizengamot - and failing? Amos, what do you think?"

Amos Diggory was still getting used to being the Chief Warlock, what was important to him though was that he did the job properly. He had a wife and son that he loved more than life itself, those were the two most important opinions to Amos. He already knew what Cedric would say. "They fight as a team, Cornelius, whatever the battle and whoever the opponent. I had some long chats with my son over this matter, he's very friendly with all four of them. Had they asked, he would have been down there with them! He and three other fourth years take part in their training every Sunday, and every Sunday they get their arses kicked. After seeing what they did in the Chamber of Secrets, Cedric now thinks getting his arse kicked is a badge of honour - no one else can get near them."

Again, this was something Fudge had not heard before, Cedric had only told his father after the Hogwarts evacuation sent him homeward.

"Did you know that once a week, those four teach the entire first year Defence against the Dark Arts. They have first years producing protego shields..."

"WHAT! Preposterous..."

"That's exactly what I said, Cornelius, until Cedric told me he helps with their lessons - and saw it with his own eyes. The first year call themselves 'Crow's Marauders', have an official club badge and everything. Oh, the club is also staff sponsored by Professor Hobson, the same veela who probably saved all their lives down in the Chamber of Secrets. They were all in equal danger, they all

played their part in the victory so therefore should all be treated the same."

With a groan, Cornelius' head slumped onto his desktop. "Damned if I do, damned if I don't! Has either of you got any other options for me?"

This was what Amelia was waiting for. "Cornelius, I thought the stroke you pulled with the goblin ambassador was masterful, so why rest on your laurels? Let's keep pushing reforms and, if we go down, we go down fighting for what we believe in - for what is right."

"If it's all the same to you, Amelia, I'd rather not go down at all. I'm all out of brilliant ideas at the moment so anything you have will certainly be listened to."

Amelia just had a flash of how Cornelius must have felt trying to sell her the idea of a Goblin Ambassador, this one though was even more out there. "In all this, we haven't mentioned the one name at the centre of everything we've discussed - were you just going to hand Harry another Order of Merlin?"

This got another groan from the minister. "What happened to keeping them all the same?"

"They will be the same, Harry's already got one! What he doesn't have is a title." Amelia held her hand up to stop the expected interruptions. "Harry Potter is heir to a title, Harry Crow is not. Harry is also Hogwarts Champion, a title he will hold for life. I propose we grant him a piece of land, near Hogwarts, with a house and a title. Harry Crow, Baron of Kingussie."

Amos had to interrupt, Amelia had clearly overlooked something. "...except that Harry Crow is a goblin, and goblins can't live anywhere but Gringotts..." The words dried up in his throat as Amos realised Amelia had overlooked nothing. "...are you crazy?"

"Crazy as a fox - who's going to give a shit about a muggle born witch being awarded an Order of Merlin, First Class, when compared to that?"

The minister totally agreed with that assessment. "Yes, they'll be far too busy chasing us out of our offices with pitchforks and burning torches."

"Ah, but then we release our secret weapon..."

That led to a pause in the discussion, a pause that was eventually broken by the minister. "Are you going to tell us what this secret weapon is?"

With a canny smile, Amelia revealed her idea. "How about some extremely positive goblin publicity? Publicity so positive, we will all want a goblin neighbour. Don't underestimate the popularity of another summer awards ball either, especially when that ball is for the Heroes of Hogwarts - and will have the new Baron of Kingussie in attendance."

Cornelius was now very interested, positive publicity always had his attention.

"For over a decade, two prominent pure blood aurors have resided in ward forty nine of St Mungo's - they were alive but took no part in the world around them. They are not there anymore. A few weeks ago I visited them, I sat and had a conversation with Alice Longbottom."

Amelia was renowned for her stoicism but both men could see the emotion clearly etched on her face as she talked about this. "They are currently in a goblin medical facility and have even visited a muggle hospital. The point is, our best healers could do nothing for them yet, in our arrogance, we ignored all other options. Frank and Alice will never be the people they were before but they are already far beyond what the remaining Longbottom family had hoped for."

The politician in Cornelius was very weary of this. "Just what is the goblins' angle on this?"

"Cornelius, the answer is exceedingly simple - and nothing to do with politics. Not only is Neville one of Harry's best friends, Alice Longbottom is his godmother. Apart from you and Amos here, I have discussed this idea with no one else. There has been no goblin input or scheme, I'm simply offering an alternative to the shocking



embarrassment that Miss Granger being denied her award would bring."

"Are you saying the goblins have no plans to publish this, rubbing our noses in the fact we couldn't heal our own people?"

Amelia could understand the minister's view, they really knew so little about the goblin nation. "When holidaying with Harry over the summer, I got to know Barchoke a lot better - Susan considers him a kind of honorary uncle now. He told me that one of the dreams his nation had was that his son's wedding would see witches, wizards, muggles and goblins all in attendance. I don't see anything wrong with that dream and hope to be one of the witches invited - you better believe everyone will be treated equally by the bride and groom."

Amos tried to be the voice of reason here. "Amelia, I don't see anything wrong with that dream either. Dreams are good but we have to face reality here, I think changing another law that affects the goblins is too much, too soon."

"Amos, I agree with you except for one glaring problem. The boy-who-lived deciding to remain a goblin would make our government the laughing stock of Europe - if not the world." No one present could dispute what a disaster that outcome would be so Amelia spelled out some more facts.

"A wizard killed both his parents, and tried to do the same to him while he was still a babe. It was witches and wizards that placed his godfather in Azkaban and his godmother in St Mungo's. It was also a wizard that abandoned him on a muggle doorstep as a baby - are you seeing the pattern here?"

Both Cornelius and Amos were rather green about the gills at just how badly their society had failed their saviour. Amelia though was by no means finished.

"Now, the other side of the coin has the goblins raising Harry to be a fine young man. They were instrumental in freeing his godfather, are totally responsible for bringing back his godmother and treat his chosen girl as a princess. Knowing all that, we need to look at our problem again. Harry thinks of himself as a goblin, and that is the side of him we need to appeal to if we want any chance of that

decision ever going in our favour. He won't give a shit about being Baron of Kingussie but he will proudly accept it, knowing the impact it will have on his nation. Is it too much, too soon - yes. Can we afford not to do this - that is what we need to decide here."

Cornelius was between a rock and a hard place, his choices appeared to be get squashed or try and blast his way out. "Do you really think the goblins announcing they managed to heal people we couldn't will have such a positive impact?"

"Absolutely not - but Augusta Longbottom announcing it would. Both she and Neville feel they owe the goblins a debt that can never be repaid, this would be her opportunity to do so. When Augusta Longbottom speaks, witches and wizards the length and breadth of Britain will listen. There are those we will never convince, just like there are those we won't have to - Harry's involvement being enough to guarantee their votes. It's the moderates in the centre we need to convince. It will be hard, it will be close but I think we can pull this off."

Cornelius couldn't think of any other alternatives with another old idiom popping into his mind - he might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb. Failing to gain approval for Miss Granger's award would just as surely end his political career as Harry's supposed title would, probably not so swiftly though. He was thinking of something that might just tilt the scales more in their favour. "Do you think we could get the goblins to open a Gringotts branch in Hogsmeade? That would certainly help the local businesses and might even see the village grow."

Amelia privately thought she could get a lot more than that from the goblins if they could change this law. She nodded her agreement before cautiously proceeding. "If we are really going to go ahead with this, can I suggest I privately approach Harry, Augusta and Barchoke on this matter? I would like to gain their opinions before we pass this over to Arthur."

Cornelius looked to Amos. "I've got nothing better, Minister. While I still think we're proceeding too fast, the proposal will certainly have my personal and public support."

"Okay, Amelia, proceed with caution and then we'll have another meeting to decide if this is definitely going ahead. At that point, we'll

bring Arthur into the mix. Do we have anything else that needs to be dealt with tonight?"

"Just one thing, Augusta wants to know if she can have ministerial backing for offering the Defence against the Dark Arts position to a werewolf."

With that, Cornelius' head was once more back on his desk.

A/N thanks for reading

Chp50